

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start
with **Magical Tools**

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Hisaya Amagishi

Illustrator: Kei



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The Day She Decided to Hold Her Head High

“I’m sorry, Dahlia. I want to call off our engagement.”

It was Dahlia and her fiancé’s first day together in their new house. They had moved in little more than an hour ago.

Her fiancé’s sudden announcement felt to Dahlia like something out of an otome game. It was the kind of fate that befell the villainess, determined to have the handsome prince in her clutches, at the school graduation ceremony. But there was no such wicked young woman in the room now; the two of them were completely alone. It seemed Dahlia’s mind was just trying to distract her from reality.

“Can I ask why?”

Tobias’s—her fiancé’s—familiar light brown eyes glistened with tears.

“I’ve...found my true love.”

For Dahlia not to burst into laughter at that moment took a praiseworthy amount of self-control.

Theirs was a world filled with magic, monsters, knights, and sorcerers. Such things had been mere fantasy to Dahlia until the day she’d been reincarnated here. In her previous life, she’d been born into an ordinary household in Japan. She had gone to high school and college, then found work at a company that produced household appliances. Although she had hoped to stay in their manufacturing department, she’d been transferred in her second year to a position handling customer complaints. It was grueling, soul-crushing work. Late one night, while working overtime, she’d suddenly felt an intense pain pierce her chest. That was the last thing she remembered. She could only guess she’d died of a heart attack.

The next time she’d opened her eyes, she had found herself in this world, in the body of a small child. Her new name was Dahlia Rossetti. Unlike the flower she was named after, Dahlia was rather *subdued* in her appearance. If you were

to be less kind, you might just call her plain. Her reincarnation hadn't panned out quite like the stories she'd read in her previous life—rather than wealth and nobility, she'd been reborn into a family of toolmakers.

However, the tools they created were no ordinary hammers and chisels. In this world of fantasy, even humble craftspeople dealt in magic.

Dahlia's father, Carlo Rossetti, was a master of magical toolmaking. Such was his skill that the king had made him an honorary baron (a nonhereditary title, unfortunately). Dahlia had grown up surrounded by magical tools, and she had never wanted to do anything other than follow in her father's footsteps.

Carlo counted a certain merchant among his close friends. When Dahlia was nineteen and a fledgling toolmaker in her own right, it was decided that she would marry the merchant's second son—Tobias Orlando, the young man who now sat across from her. Tobias was also a toolmaker and had apprenticed under her father. He now worked for his own father's company, Orlando & Co., handling the development and sales of their magical tools. He was academically gifted and handsome too—among common folk like them, he was quite a catch.

Dahlia and Tobias had intended to marry once she turned twenty and he turned twenty-two, but the sudden death of Tobias's father caused the family to go into a period of mourning. Then, just as the mourning period had ended and the couple's wedding day had approached, Dahlia's father followed his friend into the grave.

Even by this world's standards, both of them had gone before their time. Dahlia had a fair idea of the cause. Though he'd tried many times to give it up, her father had been a heavy drinker till the end.

Two years had passed since Dahlia and Tobias's initial engagement. At long last, every form had been signed, and there was finally a lull in their work. They had moved into their new home, and tomorrow, they would formally register their marriage. At least, that had been the plan.

The two of them sat in silence on opposite sides of the living room table. Dahlia's eyes were downcast, and she expressed only a single sigh.

This didn't feel real. Surely she was supposed to cry, or get angry, or *something*. Instead, she just felt utterly, utterly tired.

Still, it was no good just sitting here. They had to figure out what to do now.

“Who is she?”

After a pause, Tobias spoke without prevaricating. “Emilia. Emilia Tallini.”

Recognizing the name, Dahlia soon recalled the young woman to whom it belonged. Emilia had begun working at Orlando & Co. as a receptionist just a few months ago. She was a sweet and gentle girl with honey-colored hair, warm brown eyes, and a petite frame. She could hardly have been more different from Dahlia, whose tall stature was her only distinguishing feature. It came as a surprise to her that Tobias favored a kittenish little thing like that.

“I intend to marry her.”

“I see.” She hadn’t asked. She could feel a headache coming on. “We’ll have to sort out the paperwork, then.”

“All we have to do is agree on it, don’t we?”

If only life were so simple, she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue for the moment.

Since becoming engaged, the two of them had been working under a joint registration with the Merchants’ Guild. In anticipation of their marriage, they’d each borne half the cost of building their new home. These contracts had to be dissolved, names changed.

“We went to the Merchants’ Guild with our fathers and submitted our engagement certificate, remember? There’s a section in that document for breaking the engagement. We’ll need to change our joint registration with the guild into separate ones as well. If you’re going to marry her, you need to finish this properly.”

“Right, the engagement certificate. I remember now.”

“We’ll go to the guild this afternoon and find out what needs to be done. Will two o’clock be all right?”

“Yeah.”

With that settled, there should have been no reason for him to linger, but he just sat there scratching his right temple with a finger. She knew he did that

when he had something uncomfortable to say.

“Is there something else?”

“Well, she, uh... She mentioned she’d like to live here.”

Tobias was the one who’d overseen most of the house’s construction. The only part Dahlia had had much say in was the workshop they were supposed to have used together, so she wasn’t greatly attached to the place.

Still, losing your fiancé was depressing enough without hearing that his new love was eager to move into your house.

“Once we’ve settled the finances, we’ll turn the joint ownership of the house over to you. Then I’ll get my things back home as soon as possible.”

“I’m sorry.”

Without another word, Tobias got up and left.

For a while, Dahlia simply sat there staring down at the table. In both her previous life and this one, she’d always had a slight tendency to slouch.

Dahlia had never so much as been in a relationship in her past life, let alone gotten married. Even here, it had taken until she was almost twenty. And now, just when she’d thought her love life was finally blossoming...

“If anything happens, let Tobias look after you,” Dahlia’s father had told her. She was sure he’d never imagined things would turn out like this.

Tomorrow had been the day they’d planned to register their marriage at the city hall; they had never actually wed. Even so, they’d spent a whole two years engaged to each other. Nearly all of their friends and acquaintances knew about it. No doubt their breakup would bring a deluge of sympathy and gossip. The thought made her even more depressed.

There was also the fact that, up until now, she’d procured all the materials for her tool making through Orlando & Co. Once she and Tobias were no longer engaged, perhaps they’d cease doing business with her. Even if they didn’t, it would be a horribly awkward arrangement.

The more she thought about it, the worse her headache became.

A memory of the day she and Tobias were engaged drifted into her mind. She recalled something he'd said to her after the initial pleasantries had been exchanged.

"You're awfully tall, aren't you?"

She was indeed somewhat tall for a woman, while Tobias was slightly short for a man. Their height difference was around three centimeters. With high heels on, Dahlia was, of course, the taller one. After that day, she'd stopped wearing heels, sticking to flats at all times.

Her natural red hair was much too bright, Tobias had said, so she'd dyed it a dark brown and kept it tied up.

Tobias didn't like anyone whose appearance drew attention, so Dahlia had swapped her silver-rimmed glasses for black-rimmed ones and made her already subdued wardrobe duller still, until all she wore were shades of navy and dark gray.

These past two years, she'd taken such care both at work and at home to become the ideal wife for Tobias. It seemed that he, however, had never looked at her that way.

She remembered something else as well—something about work in her previous life.

Whenever she had apologized to a complaining customer, she would hang her head. Whenever her boss had roared at her for not handling a complaint quickly enough, she would hang her head. Whenever she'd thought about the increasingly distant friends she had no time to contact, she would become depressed and hang her head.

She was still hanging her head when she'd slumped over her desk and breathed her last in that world. That desk was the last thing she had seen before she'd died.

"This has to stop."

Dahlia looked up and out the window, through which sunlight was streaming into the room.

In her previous life, she'd tried so hard to please everyone that it had eventually killed her. In this one, she'd done everything she could to become Tobias's ideal woman, and this was where it had gotten her.

She'd been given a second chance at life. Was this really how she wanted to use it?

Enough was enough. It was time she held her head up high.

She wasn't going to hide what she liked and what she didn't anymore. She was lucky enough to have her work as a magical toolmaker, which she loved. She was able to support herself; she didn't need to rely on anyone else. She would work hard, she would go where she pleased, and she would eat and drink whatever she liked.

From now on, she was going to live life *her* way.

Filled with a brand-new vigor, Dahlia stood up. The spring sky outside was so bright and blue that it stung her eyes.



Breaking Off the Engagement

Dahlia stepped out of what should have been her new home and set off down the street. The sun shone down with a gentle warmth, the red brick streets of the royal capital bustling with people and carriages.

This kingdom, Ordine, had a history going back over two hundred years. It was a peaceful and well-governed land with fair and sensible laws. The royal capital was exceptionally safe and orderly, so Dahlia had heard. Sure enough, a young woman could walk through the city alone without fear, something that was apparently unthinkable in other kingdoms.

She was thankful to have been reborn in this place, even if it was in an entirely new world.

It would have been nice if that good luck had carried over to the matter of her marriage, but perhaps that was asking too much. With slightly quickened steps, Dahlia turned off the main street and made her way to a small salon with a blue roof.

“Hi, Irma. Are you busy?”

“Oh, there’s our new bride! Come on in. We’re just about to have lunch.”

Seemingly finished with her morning clients, Dahlia’s dark-haired friend was sweeping up the hair on the floor.

“Thanks. I’m not a bride yet, but I’ll take you up on lunch. Is Marcello in?”

“Yeah, he’s in the kitchen. I’ll be there once I’ve finished cleaning up here, but you go on and have something to eat.”

Dahlia didn’t need to be shown the way; she knew the salon well. She made her way to the back and through the door that led into the kitchen.

“Oh, hi, Dahlia! What can I get you? Orange juice? Glass of wine?”

There, taking his lunch, was just the man she was looking for—Marcello, from the Couriers’ Guild. This sturdily built man with sandy hair was Irma’s husband

and a good friend of Dahlia's. Dahlia had heard that he often came home for lunch, and she was pleased to find him here.

"Could I have some orange juice? Thanks."

He obliged, handing her a plate with some sandwiches, too, as she sat down across from him at the table.

Irma's sandwiches were always a delight. Today's were on thickly sliced rye bread, with two different fillings. One featured a beautifully balanced combination of cheese, smoked ham, and lettuce; the other contained egg and sliced vegetables mixed with generous amounts of fresh mayonnaise. Dahlia had the recipe for both, but somehow she couldn't quite replicate Irma's flavors.

They ate in silence, and Irma came in just as Dahlia was finishing her first sandwich. She drank her orange juice and, once he'd finished eating, turned to Marcello.

"Marcello, I'm sorry to trouble you again after you just moved all my furniture the other day, but I'm afraid I need it moved back. As soon as possible, preferably."

"That's no problem. I can do it today if after four's all right. A few of the lads'll be free then. Did Tobias have enough already?"

"Did it not suit the new place?"

Dahlia couldn't help but smile wryly as both husband and wife questioned her at the same time.

"He broke off our engagement."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Once again, the two spoke in unison. Summoning up the cheeriest smile she could, Dahlia curtly explained the situation.

"Tobias Orlando has found true love, so he says."

Dead silence. The couple's faces became as stiff as a pair of masks.

Speaking of which, Dahlia hadn't seen much in the way of masks since coming to this world. It was a shame; she was sure they'd be popular with the children if shops sold them when the winter festival came around. Held in the royal capital each year, the festival was best known as an event for couples to enjoy and an opportunity for lonely hearts to find a new partner. It dawned on her then that she and Tobias had never gone. She herself had never suggested it, but she couldn't help wondering if there might have been more to it than that.

Dahlia's escapist pondering was suddenly interrupted by the others at the table.

"Is he off his rocker?!" Marcello shouted. "You just moved in together!"

"After two years, *that's* what he comes out with?!" Irma huffed, incensed.

"'True love' my ass! Cheating's what that is!"

"Unbelievable!"

Seeing the two of them get so angry on her behalf, Dahlia couldn't help feeling pleased. Did that make her a little twisted? She hoped not.

Over the last two years, Dahlia, Tobias, Irma, and Marcello had met many a time to enjoy meals and drinks together. Calling them best friends might have been an exaggeration, but they certainly enjoyed one another's company. Dahlia had heard that Marcello and Tobias often went drinking together after Marcello finished transporting goods for Orlando & Co. She felt a little guilty about souring that relationship.

"I appreciate it, both of you. But I'm okay, honestly. This engagement was something our fathers decided, after all, and both of them are gone now."

The moment she said that, something else occurred to her.

As far as Tobias was concerned, the benefit of marrying Dahlia must have lain in gaining the endorsement of her father, a master magical tool craftsman. Dahlia was a full-fledged toolmaker too, but unlike her father, she had not been honored with a title, and her skills were still a long way from matching his. In short, there wasn't much in it for Tobias now that her father was no longer alive. If he'd found a girl he really liked, perhaps it wasn't surprising that his priorities had changed.

“You haven’t registered your marriage yet, have you, Dahlia?” Irma asked.

“No, we were going to do that tomorrow. We haven’t even filled out the form yet.”

“Well, thank your lucky stars! You deserve so much better,” Irma said with a vigorous nod.

Dahlia would have preferred it if Tobias had made up his mind about this sooner, but yes, at least he hadn’t waited until they were actually married.

“He’s got some nerve, making a girl like you cry,” Marcello growled. “He can pay every last coin of the removal fees, and you bet I’ll pad those bills! Bah, I’m never drinking with him again.”

Dahlia had nearly pointed out that she wasn’t crying, but Marcello’s voice had grown more thunderous with every word, so she decided to hold her peace.

“Oh, Dahlia. It’s all right, you know. You can cry if you want to. How about having a few drinks with us? I can close up shop for the afternoon.”

“There’s an idea,” Marcello agreed. “If you give me your key, you can stay here, and I’ll take care of moving the furniture. Going back to that house and seeing Tobias must be the last thing you want.”

Two pairs of brown eyes—Irma’s like cinnamon, and Marcello’s a darker, terra-cotta shade—gazed at Dahlia with concern. These two were always so in tune with each other. Dahlia felt a pang of envy.

“No, I’ll be fine. I don’t want this to drag out any more than need be, so I’m going to the Merchants’ Guild today to take care of everything.”

“Well, you let us know if there’s anything we can do, all right?”

“You’re welcome here anytime.”

“Thank you both, truly.”

The egg sandwich Dahlia ate after thanking them both seemed just a little tastier than usual.



After rounding off lunch at Irma’s with a cup of coffee, Dahlia headed for the

Merchants' Guild. Located on the main street, the five-story building made of black bricks was impossible to miss. There was always a steady stream of people traveling through its three large doors, many of them visitors from overseas. Some wore vividly embroidered coats draped over their shoulders, while others sported head wraps and long robes with trailing sleeves. Wafts of perfume and spices filled Dahlia's nose as she approached the guild. She gave a friendly greeting to the guards, then went inside.

The guild's first floor was mainly for clients to consult with the staff. Dahlia's destination was the second floor, so she continued straight upstairs.

"Good afternoon."

The second floor was where the contracts desk was located, manned by a young woman with black hair and a rather stout middle-aged man. Dahlia had visited many times on account of her work, so she was acquainted with them both.

"Oh, Miss Rossetti! Congratulations on your marriage!"

"Congratulations! We're delighted for you."

Their two beaming faces were almost painful to look at.

"That's very kind of you; I appreciate it," Dahlia replied. "But Mr. Orlando has broken off our engagement, so I'll be needing our engagement certificate."

There was a scraping and clunking of wood as the two receptionists leaped up from their chairs in unison. It was as if her announcement had triggered some sort of synchronized reaction.

"Wh-Whatever for?"

"It was Mr. Orlando who made the decision, not me."

She couldn't bring herself to tell them about Tobias's "true love." It wasn't that she was trying to protect him; rather, it was *her* name that might be tarnished by her having been engaged to such a man.

"Mr. Orlando did? Is there some problem at Orlando & Co.?"

"It's not for me to say. Please, if you have questions, could you ask him directly?"

When she said that, the man seemed to grasp the situation.

“Of course, please excuse us. If the problem lies with Mr. Orlando, then we oughtn’t be asking you. Now, how can we help?”

“We’ll need witnesses for breaking off the engagement and a scrivener to help us close the joint account for our work.”

A scrivener was an overseer, verifier, and validator of all kinds of governmental and commercial contracts and agreements. Put in the terms of Dahlia’s previous world, they were a cross between an administrative consultant and a lawyer. To say it wasn’t an easy career path would be an extreme understatement. Status and connections meant nothing for an aspiring scrivener. Only after going through many grueling exams, five years of study at a specialized institution, and finding no less than ten personal guarantors could they even hope to become qualified. Even those who did eventually make the grade were always just one misstep away from being stripped of their status. Any illegal activity on their part carried a severe punishment and would lead to their guarantors being investigated as well. There were few professions so strictly regulated.

Needless to say, providing a scrivener with false information or attempting to bribe or coerce them were also very serious offenses. Engaging the services of scriveners was understandably costly, but people saw it as a worthwhile investment to avoid complications with work and trade. Thankfully, the Merchants’ Guild had a number of resident scriveners. As long as they weren’t all engaged, arranging an appointment would be an easy matter.

“One hour with the scrivener will be four gilt silver, is that all right?”

“Yes. I’ll pay the fee.”

Converted to the money of her previous world, four gilt silver was equivalent to about forty thousand yen. It was a small price to pay for preventing complications down the road.

This kingdom’s currency was made up of several different coins—the highest in value was gold, followed by gilt silver, silver, copper, and finally the small halfpenny. A loaf of bread cost about one copper, so Dahlia imagined a halfpenny to be about fifty yen in value, with a copper being around a hundred

yen. As a rough estimate, a silver coin was about a thousand yen, a gilt silver about ten thousand, and a gold about a hundred thousand yen. These were just Dahlia's guesses based on the cost of goods in this world. Food and daily necessities were cheap, while clothes and precious metals were on the expensive side.

"Would it be possible to hold the meeting at two o'clock? If not, we can come whenever it's convenient."

"Allow me to check for you."

The man hurried off to the third floor, where the scriveners' offices were located.

"Um, Miss Rossetti," the female receptionist said timidly. "You've only just moved, haven't you?"

"I was supposed to move in today. I'll be going back home to the Green Tower."

The address Dahlia had registered with the guild was that of her original home. The old tower, situated in the outskirts of town, got its name from the vines that swathed the building. She'd stepped out the tower's front door this morning and would return in the evening as if she'd never intended to leave. If nothing else, she hadn't been rendered homeless by the ordeal.

"I'm not sure what to say, but please, don't lose heart. You won't be giving up your toolmaking, will you?"

The receptionist tried to steer the conversation in a more positive direction. It was only then that Dahlia noticed the furtive, curious glances of all the other staff behind the desks.

"No, definitely not. I'll be back to work as soon as I'm settled in the tower again."

"As an employee of the guild, I'm delighted to hear that—we all are. Your magical tools are so well regarded."

"Thank you. I'm very grateful for the guild's support."

Dahlia could see the young woman was desperately trying to ameliorate the

situation, so she forced the brightest smile she could manage. She wasn't sure how bright it really was. At the very least, she hoped it showed she wouldn't be plunged into grief by the loss of her fiancé.

Just then, the male receptionist returned from the third floor. "Miss Rossetti, I've scheduled an appointment for you with Mr. Kämpfer."

Dahlia's father had made sure to impress on her the importance of employing a scrivener when engaging in important negotiations or large transactions. She had dealt with Dominic Kämpfer many times, as had her father before her. His presence would be reassuring.

Just as she breathed a small sigh of relief, everyone's gazes suddenly shifted behind her. She turned to see a woman with ivory-white hair approaching.

"Afternoon, Dahlia."

"Vice-Guildmaster, good afternoon," Dahlia replied with a small bow. "Thank you for all your support."

This woman was Gabriella Jedda, the vice-guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild. Though she was of mature years, she had an undeniably commanding presence. The finely tailored deep-blue dress and long string of baroque pearls she wore suited her well. Dahlia's father had dealt with her at the guild ever since he was a young man; Dahlia had been a student when she'd first met her.

"If you've a contract to discuss, you're welcome to use the meeting room next door. I think the third-floor rooms may be booked this afternoon."

"Thank you very much."

From "may be booked," Dahlia surmised that at the moment, they weren't. She happened to know that, for safety reasons, the meeting room attached to this office was not soundproofed. *In other words, you want to hear everything. I see.* Dahlia kept that thought to herself. However, Gabriella's scarlet lips gently curved into a smile.

"Everyone seems terribly busy today. You wouldn't mind if I filled in as one of your witnesses, would you?"

"Not at all. That would be very kind of you."

A novice toolmaker like Dahlia could hardly refuse such an offer from the vice-guildmaster herself.



Tobias entered the meeting room at precisely two o'clock. Dahlia, the two guild witnesses, and the scrivener were ready and waiting. Dahlia and Tobias sat opposite each other at the large table, both with a witness at their side. The scrivener sat one seat apart.

The witness at Tobias's side was the first to speak. "We will now proceed with the dissolution of your engagement to marry, as stipulated in the engagement certificate, and the liquidation of your joint account. There are two guild witnesses present: Vice-Guildmaster Gabriella Jedda and myself, Contract Administrator Ivano Badoer."

Ivano and Gabriella both bowed. Gabriella sat at Dahlia's side, Ivano at Tobias's.

"My name is Dominic Kämpfer, and I will be your scrivener." After introducing himself, the elderly, gray-haired man also gave a small bow.

Dominic was the Merchants' Guild's longest-serving scrivener and its most in demand. Both Dahlia's and Tobias's fathers had employed his services for many years.

"Now, in order to dissolve your engagement, we must first liquidate your joint account with the Merchants' Guild through which you receive your work orders, then apportion the balance. The current balance of the account shared by Mr. Tobias Orlando and Miss Dahlia Rossetti comes to forty gold. You will each be apportioned half of this total; is this satisfactory?"

Once both of them had assented, Dominic unwrapped a parcel that sat on the table beside the account documents. Dahlia and Tobias each had a blue cloth laid in front of them, upon which were stacked twenty gold coins. In yen, Dahlia estimated the value of each stack to be around two million. These were the profits Dahlia had earned from the original magical tools she had registered with the guild, payments she'd received for custom orders, and so on.

Most people would consider this quite a handsome sum of money, but for a

magical toolmaker, maintaining a large amount of savings was a necessity. Their materials were expensive, and research quickly ate up funds as well. Furthermore, given that there was no such thing as insurance in this world, it was also important to have a safety net in case of illness or injury.

“Now, let us proceed to the dissolution of your engagement. The engagement certificate stipulates thus: ‘the party responsible for the dissolution shall be liable to pay the sum of twelve gold in damages to the other party.’ Which of you will be paying?”

“I will.” There was a cold formality in Tobias’s voice, quite different from his usual manner. “Twelve gold...” Dahlia heard him mutter to himself.

Was it more expensive than he’d expected, or cheaper? She couldn’t tell.

“Very well, Miss Rossetti will receive twelve gold. Do you wish to pay from the balance returned from your joint account?”

“Yes, please.”

From Tobias’s stack of twenty gold coins, twelve were transferred to Dahlia.

“We will now proceed to the contract regarding the house built during your engagement. The total cost was one hundred gold, with fifty gold paid by Mr. Orlando and fifty gold by Miss Rossetti. At present, the house is jointly owned by you both. It may be sold and the proceeds divided between you, or if one of you wishes to retain ownership of the property, you must compensate the other party with the amount paid at the time of purchase. How do you wish to proceed?”

“I will retain ownership,” Tobias replied as though it were obvious. Dahlia stayed silent.

“Very well. Please pay fifty gold to Miss Rossetti.”

From a bag he had brought with him, Tobias took out twenty gold coins and placed them alongside the stack of eight he had remaining. Then, he slid the whole amount toward Dahlia.

“I’ll get you the rest soon, Dahlia. I don’t have enough for the house right now. I swear I’ll pay you back once I can afford it.”

“Wha—?!”

The outburst came not from Dahlia, but from Ivano, seated at Tobias’s side. Gabriella stepped in.

“We cannot transfer ownership until the full amount is repaid, Mr. Orlando.”

“I know. I intend to pay the full amount. As long as Dahlia agrees, we can transfer ownership now, can’t we?”

Dahlia was speechless.

Was there truly a man alive who would think to take out a loan from the woman he’d just broken up with so he could live in their house with his new lover? Was there really a man so stupid and so shameless as to ask her this here, at the Merchants’ Guild, in front of two official witnesses and a scrivener, as if it were the most natural thing in the world?

Yes, unfortunately, there was—and he was sitting right in front of her. Dahlia couldn’t believe this was the same Tobias she’d always known.

Dominic loudly cleared his throat twice.

“Transferring ownership of the property before full payment has been made can lead to very serious problems. I strongly recommend against it, but it is your decision. How would you like to proceed?”

“We will wait until the payment is made in full,” said Dahlia, flatly refusing Tobias’s proposition.

“But it has to be done now! I promised Emilia we’d move in right away!”

Silence fell. Even Tobias, clearly aware that he’d blurted out too much, suddenly seemed at a loss for words.

Ivano may as well have had an enormous question mark pasted over his face as he goggled at Dahlia’s former fiancé. Gabriella wore an elegant smile, the warmth of which did not reach her eyes. Only Dominic somehow maintained a neutral expression, though his fingers were pressed so hard into the papers he held that they were turning white.

While looking at the scene in front of her, Dahlia was putting every last pleasant memory of her engagement through a mental shredder.

Gabriella was the first to break the silence.

“The guild has a relationship of trust with you, Mr. *Orlando*, so you are welcome to take out a loan with us.”

She directed a charming smile at the discomfited Tobias. The pointed way in which she spoke his surname did not escape Dahlia’s notice.

“You will be working, I trust, so monthly repayments should be manageable. If you intend to settle down with a new lady, it’s terribly important you properly settle your debts. She won’t think well of you otherwise.”

“I understand. Thank you.” His reply was a barely audible mutter.



The moment all the paperwork for the engagement and the loan was finished, Tobias all but ran out the door. The walls of this room situated next to the reception desk were exceedingly thin; the staff would no doubt have an entertaining story to tell their friends over drinks tonight. Doing her best to ignore a persistent headache, Dahlia finally stood up. She gave her thanks to Ivano, Gabriella, and Dominic before turning to leave.

“Er, Miss Dahlia? I hope you won’t think me rude, but I must ask you something.” The man with mustard-colored hair paused while gathering together the documents, his voice small and hesitant.

“Not at all, Ivano. Please, ask away.”

“Has Tobias always been such an id—I mean, such a man as that?”

Though he’d caught himself before the word “idiot” slipped out, Dahlia knew exactly what he’d wanted to say. A faraway look came into her eyes.

“No, that...was a first for me as well.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I was fine, but what can I do? No point in worrying about what I can’t change. Besides, I’ll be able to run my business just the way I like now. When I think of it that way, it doesn’t seem so bad,” Dahlia mused, being quite candid.

“I’m glad we could assist you today, Miss Dahlia.”

“Oh, Dominic, I’m very grateful.”

“It is a shame things turned out this way, but I hope you will keep your spirits up.”

“Yes, I’ll do my best.”

“I owe your father a great deal, you know. He left us so soon, I never had a chance to repay him. Please let me know if there’s ever anything I can help you with. Beyond just my services as a scrivener, I mean.”

“I will. Thank you so much.”

Dominic’s low, gentle voice reminded Dahlia of her father. She felt deeply grateful for his kindness.

“He’s quite right, you know,” Gabriella chimed in. “There’s no need for you to carry your troubles alone. You have many friends and colleagues who value you greatly, so be sure to reach out to them should you need help. Myself included, of course.”

“I understand,” Dahlia replied softly.

“Now, the paperwork’s all taken care of, but what do you plan to do next?” Gabriella asked.

“For now, I’ll go to the new house and have all my furniture taken back home.”

“Will you need a hand? I can fetch some people, if you’d like.”

“No, thank you. I only moved out of the tower this morning, so going back again will be straightforward.”

Gabriella nodded in acknowledgment before opening the meeting room door wide. The sight of all the staff immediately averting their curious gazes was really quite funny. Gabriella turned slowly back to Dahlia with an elegant smile.

“I’ll just say this, Dahlia: congratulations on a lucky escape.”



When Dahlia descended to the guild’s first floor, she found Marcello already there waiting for her. Two other men from the Couriers’ Guild were with him.

All three of them wore a vivid green armband, the badge of a Couriers' Guild member. This color represented the wind, with the idea being that the guild's members carried goods with all the ease and swiftness of a breeze.

"Hi, Dahlia. Everything taken care of?"

"Yes, it's all done. We can go straight to the house now."

"Right, let's go and get things moved, then."

They boarded a large carriage that would take them to what should have been Dahlia's new home. The carriage itself was ordinary enough, but what pulled it certainly wasn't—it was drawn along by a gray sleipnir. These eight-legged animals were about one-and-a-half times larger than ordinary horses and many times stronger, making them a popular choice for the Couriers' Guild. Their gentle expressions and deep-black eyes actually made them quite endearing.

It took only a few minutes to reach the house. When it had come to choosing the location, Tobias had prioritized close proximity to the Merchants' Guild and his family home, where Orlando & Co. was based. This had been to facilitate the transport of their products and to make arranging business meetings more convenient—although none of this was of any use to Dahlia now.

To her relief, no one was home. She set about locating all of her belongings.

"So, if you could take the boxes in the corridor there, the boxes in the workshop, and everything you brought over last time, that would be great. I haven't unpacked anything yet, so it's all ready to go."

Until last week, Tobias had been using the workshop in Dahlia's house. He'd bought a lot of new equipment for them to use in the new house, but Dahlia liked her old, familiar tools, so she'd brought them with her. They were still all bundled up, so it would be no trouble to move them back.

"Your furniture was just the closet and the dresser, right?"

"That's right. They're still empty."

The closet and dresser were keepsakes from Dahlia's mother. Of course, since she had never known her mother, it was the way her father had treasured these

pieces that she had always been more keenly aware of. Both were currently in a room that had been intended for Dahlia's use.

"Got it. We'll load up the stuff that's still packed just as it is." Marcello turned to his men. "Double-wrap the closet and dresser, will you?" The two of them set about readying the large cloth sheets. "Is there anything else you want us to take?"

"Well, I bought the bed in the master bedroom, but I already have my own back at the tower. I wonder what I should do with it."

"We can take it apart and bring it with us, or you could sell it off. Hell, you could make Tobias buy it."

They made their way to the bedroom as they spoke.

At Tobias's request, Dahlia had bought them a large double bed. It had been a good bargain, as she remembered. The light on the bedside table was something she'd bought partly out of interest as a magical toolmaker. It was made with a new kind of magical technology that allowed its brightness to be adjusted. *I'll just take a look at it to see how it works*, she thought to herself as she entered the room.

"Oh!"

After just a single step inside, Dahlia hurriedly retreated and closed the door again. She didn't get the chance to so much as look at the bedside table. The matching ivory-white bedding was in disarray, a pillow lying on the floor.

"What's wrong, Dahlia?"

"Er, it's, um..." She fumbled for words.

"Is someone in there?"

"No. Well, not anymore."

"Mind if I take a look? If it's a thief, they could still be hiding in there."

"Oh, you're right."

Dahlia quickly scooted away from the door. The possibility of a thief being inside hadn't even crossed her mind, though she now remembered hearing that

they often targeted new houses. *We'd best be careful.*

"Um, is it all right if I stay out here?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll make sure it's safe. It's an en-suite bedroom, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

Years working for the Couriers' Guild meant Marcello was familiar with how most houses were laid out. He was able to build a mental picture of rooms with ease. After listening at the door for a few moments, he took a metal rod in his hand and cautiously entered.

"C'mon out, Tobias, you pea brain. Time to meet your maker."

Dahlia pretended not to hear the menacing snarl that carried through the door. It wasn't long before Marcello appeared again.

"Nothing but a couple of rats," he grumbled. "Made this damn mess and then scurried away." Apparently, Tobias had sunk so low in his estimation that he was on the level of vermin now.

"I see. I'm just glad we didn't run into them."

One of the men working in another room called out, "Hey, Marcello! D'you have a minute?"

"Sure, I'll be right there."

Assuming they had some guild business to talk about, Dahlia lingered in the corridor, staring blankly at a pile of boxes. She had less than she thought. She'd left some things at home, intending to bring them over later—her books, clothes for other seasons, and so on. That had turned out to be a good decision.

"Uh, Dahlia, could you come in here for a sec?"

There was a grim look on Marcello's face as he leaned out of the doorway.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, but, uh, your closet's filled with women's clothes."

"Well, she didn't waste any time."

“I’m sorry, but just to be sure... These aren’t yours, are they?”

“No, they certainly aren’t.”

She saw a puff-sleeved dress in pale yellow and a colorful, floral print stole, as well as a pink gown generously trimmed with lace. It was clear from the sizes alone, never mind the designs, that these did not belong to Dahlia. She didn’t own a single garment that was anything like these things in style or color.

“Those things were in the dresser.”

Marcello pointed to a table, upon which lay a pink makeup bag, a white handkerchief, and a silver pendant. The flat, round pendant was engraved with a coat of arms Dahlia had never seen before. She furrowed her brow as she examined it.

“This looks like it belongs to a noble—a viscount or higher.”

“Not a baron?”

“I don’t think barons usually have a coat of arms. If someone has defeated a huge monster and been awarded a ceremonial weapon, I hear they sometimes engrave those, but it’s not common.”

She used the edge of the handkerchief to turn the pendant over, careful not to touch it directly. Etched on the reverse was the family name, somewhat faint with age but still legible.

“Tallini... Yes, this must be hers.”

Emilia Tallini, just as Tobias had told her.

One of Marcello’s men spoke up. “I think that coat of arms might be Lord Tallini’s. He’s the viscount who governs the fourth town along the southern highway. My grandmother’s from there.”

Everyone’s expressions became uneasy. The woman Tobias had brought here was connected to Viscount Tallini. Leaving the pendant here may have been a deliberate ploy to tell them that.

“Want me to drag that fool Tobias back here so he can explain himself?”

Marcello asked Dahlia.

“No. The woman who owns this pendant works at his company. Besides, I’m finished with him. I’ve got no intention of contacting him again.”

“All right. It’ll cost a bit, but if I were you, I’d get a scrivener in to verify that everything you’re taking belongs to you. Better being safe than sorry if there’s nobility involved. I’ll get you the list of everything we moved for you the first time.”

“Thank you. That sounds like a good idea.”

It was an extra expense, but if it would avoid any hassle, then she was more than happy to pay up.

“Shall we send for a scrivener from the Couriers’ Guild? Or would you prefer one from the Merchants’ Guild?”

“Could you see if there’s anyone free at the Merchants’ Guild, please? Dominic Kämpfer would be ideal, if he’s available.”

“Of course,” said one of the men. “I’ll go right away.” With that, he hurried off to the carriage.

“I’m so sorry to waste your time like this.”

Marcello kindly brushed off her apology. “Not at all. There’re always a few disagreements over who owns what when a couple’s splitting up. We get scribes in to sort things out all the time.”

“That’s right. Please, Miss Rossetti, don’t let it bother you.”

She could see they were doing their best to make her feel better, and she managed to put on a brave face. Marcello seemed to see right through it, though.

“If you’d like, I can pay the scrivener and send the bill on to Tobias.”

“No, no, that’s all right. I’ll pay. I don’t want any complaints out of him.”

“Well then, why don’t you celebrate not getting married to the biggest fool in Ordine by letting me cover it?”

“I appreciate the thought, Marcello. But I’d much rather you and Irma just come dine with me at the tower once everything’s settled down. We’ll have a

proper drink this time.”

“Sounds dandy. Make sure you get the good stuff, eh?”

For as long as she'd been engaged to Tobias, Dahlia had limited herself to just one glass whenever she drank alcohol. Tobias didn't like her to drink. It wasn't ladylike, he'd said, for a woman to drink until her face turned red. Since then, she'd all but stopped. Tobias tended to become sullen when he drank. More than once, he'd been carried home on Marcello's back after a few too many. But now Dahlia didn't need to hold back anymore. Hitting a bar with just Irma and Marcello didn't sound bad at all.

While Dahlia and Marcello were chatting about this and that, the man who'd taken the carriage returned with Dominic in tow.

“I'm sorry to trouble you again so soon, Dominic.”

“It's quite all right; I did say to call on me anytime. No need to apologize.”

Dominic listened with a kindly smile as Dahlia explained all about the move, her furniture and belongings, and the things here that were not hers. She tried to remain indifferent, but the overwhelming air of sympathy filling the room almost made her want to run and hide. Only Dominic remained serenely calm and professional as he took stock of all Dahlia's belongings and prepared the documents in no time at all.

“How much will that be? I'll pay now.”

“Ah, well, we finished our meeting earlier a little ahead of time, as I recall. Three silver to cover the cost of documents will be plenty.”

“Thank you.”

She handed over the coins and then quickly got back to packing.

The light outside was dimming, evening drawing in already. The back of Marcello's carriage had ample space for cargo and enough seats for several people. Once everything was loaded, everyone climbed into the back, and they set off. It was that time in the evening when the roads became more congested with carriages and people, making the journey a little longer than before, but it only took around ten minutes before they reached the Merchants' Guild.

“I just need to go and hand in the house key at the counter. I won’t be long.”

“You sure? I don’t mind going,” Marcello offered.

“The two of you must be tired. Let me take it for you,” said Dominic, stopping Dahlia as she made to climb down from the carriage.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t trouble you any further.”

“After our meeting this afternoon, I expect the rumor mill is in full swing. You’ll be mobbed. Please, won’t you leave this to me?”

He was right. She could very well imagine the staff quizzing her on every detail of the breakup the moment she stepped through the door. She truly didn’t have the strength to face that right now.

“You’re right. Thank you, Dominic.”

“No need.”

Having taken the key, Dominic looked down pensively for a moment before raising his gaze to look Dahlia squarely in the eye.

“It may be a tad improper of me to say this, Miss Dahlia, but I believe today was an important turning point for you, and you made the right choice. I pray the future brings you naught but happiness.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you to say.”

Goodbyes exchanged, Dahlia gazed after his retreating back until he finally disappeared inside the guild.



After another short ride aboard the carriage, the high stone wall that encircled the royal capital rose into view, and along with it, the vine-wrapped tower that Dahlia called home. It was a sight for sore eyes. The Green Tower, as it was called by those who knew it, was a fairly old building made of stone. Dahlia had lived there with her father ever since she was small, but since his passing, she’d been living there alone.

Just this morning, she had been prepared to leave it behind and begin her new married life. She and Tobias could have lived here comfortably, but Tobias had had his heart set on the city center. Being close to the Merchants’ Guild

and his trading company would make it easier to manufacture and sell more of their products—that had been his reasoning.

The tower was ringed by a wall made of dark, red-brown bricks. It was about the height of a man and had bronze gates wide enough for a carriage to pass through. Dahlia jumped down from her seat and laid a hand upon the gates. Just a touch, and they swung smoothly open all on their own.

“They’re really nifty, those gates,” said one of Marcello’s men, impressed.

“Wish all the ones at the Couriers’ Guild worked like that,” muttered the other.

As long as they were on the register, all a person had to do was lightly touch these gates and they would open. It wasn’t necessarily the gates themselves that interested the men, just the automatic function. Opening and closing high-security gates could make moving goods in and out of warehouses a slow process. There were some castles and homes of high-ranking nobles that had automatic gates, but from what Dahlia had heard, they required quite a large amount of magic crystals and regular maintenance.

As far as Dahlia was aware, however, her gate had never been resupplied with crystals, and it didn’t require any particular upkeep. Her grandfather, the man who’d designed and built the gate, had left no blueprints, not even passing on any verbal hints regarding its construction. To figure out the mechanism, she would have to take it apart. Her father had always said he’d do it one of these days, but he’d passed away before he had the chance.

“It was my grandfather who made this, but he didn’t leave us blueprints or anything,” she told them. “If I ever do manage to work it out and recreate it, you’ll be my first customers.”

“Hey, if anyone can do it, you can.”

“We’ll be waiting with bated breath!”

Dahlia couldn’t help smiling at their enthusiasm, even if it was a little over the top. Once they pulled up to the tower, Dahlia took out her key and unlocked the front door. This key was just an ordinary one, for an ordinary lock.

Now it was time to unload. Members of the Couriers’ Guild often used magic

to enhance their strength. As for any boxes that were a little heavy for Dahlia and any large pieces of furniture, these men could carry them up the tower's stairs with ease. Her few belongings were whisked inside in the blink of an eye.

"I reckon that's all of it. Just sign here, would you?"

"Thanks for everything, Marcello. You've been such a big help."

Once Dahlia signed the receipt, the men bid her goodbye and returned to the carriage. Only Marcello hung back.

"You won't have anything in for dinner; why don't you come eat with Irma and me tonight?"

"Oh, it's nice of you to offer. I've got some dried food, though, and I want to get everything unpacked tonight."

"All right. Don't overdo it, though."

Dahlia followed Marcello to the gate, ready to see him off. But after hopping up onto the carriage, he soon returned with a somewhat large burlap sack, which he handed over to her. Nestled inside were Dahlia's favorite walnut bread and a bottle of red wine.

"Irma said to give you this if you weren't coming over."

"Thank you. You really do have the loveliest wife."

"She's a good friend, huh?"

"She really is."

Dahlia felt a slight lump in her throat, but she swallowed it back. If she cried now, Marcello would never leave her here on her own. The last thing she wanted was to impose on anyone more than she already had today.

Irma had such good instincts. She must have known Dahlia would just want to hole up in her tower tonight and wouldn't come out even if invited. The two of them were childhood friends. When they were young, Irma had lived near the tower, but she'd moved into the city center to train as a hairdresser. It was there that she had met Marcello, and they'd married soon after. She and Dahlia had always kept in touch, even after Dahlia had gone to college and Irma was married. Dahlia had always felt thankful to have a friend like that.

“It won’t take me long to get the place straightened out again. As soon as everything’s settled down, you have to come over for dinner with Irma, all right?”

“Sure will. Looking forward to it.”

As the carriage finally pulled away, Dahlia waved them off with the best smile she could muster.

Sitting on her bottom and moping felt too much like admitting defeat, so instead, Dahlia set about unpacking and returning every last one of her belongings to its proper home. She opened up all the boxes, putting things back in place in the first floor’s laboratory and storeroom. In her room on the third floor, she returned the contents of her closet and dresser. She felt slightly uncomfortable using the furniture again, so she opened a few packets of her favorite soap and put them inside. In a few days’ time, they would take on a pleasant, familiar smell again. There was nothing wrong with the furniture itself, and her father had treasured it, so she decided to simply forget about what had happened to it.

By the time she’d finished unpacking and putting everything away, it was already past midnight. She decided to have a late dinner in the living room on the second floor, next to the kitchen. She sank into the sofa, sipped her wine, and took a bite of the walnut bread. The aromatic bread and the wine paired very nicely. After finishing the bread, she reached into a bag of preserved food she kept for emergencies and took out some nuts and dried fruit. Then she had a little more wine.

What a day.

She’d moved into her brand-new house this morning, only for her fiancé of two years to announce that he was leaving her for someone else. After that, it was off to the Merchants’ Guild to deal with all the paperwork, then moving all over again.

It was Tobias’s unfaithfulness that had shocked her more than anything else. She’d believed he was an honest and principled sort of person, and that he would be a good husband. She’d believed they would make a good team at work. They had never exchanged any passionate declarations of love, but she’d

assumed they would simply settle down into a nice, quiet life. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined him bringing another woman into their house on the day before they'd planned to marry. Whatever his excuse, some things were simply unforgivable. If nothing else, at least he'd seen to it that she'd have no regrets about leaving him.

"It's funny; the tears just won't come."

In theory, she ought to have been heartbroken, yet she felt no particular urge to cry. She took a hearty gulp of wine and a bite of dried fruit. As she drank, she ran her memories of Tobias through her mind. She remembered their conversations about magical tools, the two of them crafting together and discussing deliveries and pricing, but...that was *all* she remembered.

Now she understood. She hadn't been in love with him.

As she drank up the last of her wine, a few tears finally slid down her cheeks, but they had nothing to do with Tobias. She was thinking of her father. If only Carlo had been here, they could have shared everything—at first anger, then too much wine, and in the end, a good deal of laughter. Dahlia was quick to blame her moment of weakness on the wine. She'd had a little too much, that was all.



The next day, Dahlia had the worst awakening of her life.

Her front doorbell—not the one at the gates—was being rung incessantly. There were only a select few people who could open the gates. The only likely candidate was her friend Irma. But as Dahlia rubbed her sleepy eyes and opened the door, it was Tobias she saw standing there.

She'd been unpacking and tidying until late at night, then drinking wine into the early hours of the morning. Her face was puffy, her hair wild. At first she wanted to ask what on earth he was doing here so early, but then she noticed that the sun was already high in the sky.

"Uh... Look, sorry about this, but I need to have your engagement bracelet back."

She'd been in a foul enough mood already. Now, somehow, her ex-fiancé had

managed to make it ten times worse.

My engagement bracelet?

In this kingdom, it was customary for a man to give his fiancée a bracelet when they became engaged, or for the two of them to exchange bracelets. In the terms of her previous world, it was like an engagement ring and wedding ring rolled into one. There were some subtle differences, however. In cases where the man gifted the bracelet to the woman, the woman would then send him something equal to the value of at least two months' living expenses. This way, if anything were to go wrong, they could simply sell the items and not be left at a loss. It acted as a kind of insurance. If the engagement were to be broken off, the recipient of the bracelet tended to keep it.

Dahlia remembered when Tobias had given her hers. He'd cautioned her to be careful not to damage it, so she'd put it away in her jewelry box and only worn it when they went out together. In preparation for the move yesterday, she'd packed it away carefully so it wouldn't be damaged and, in truth, forgotten all about its existence until now.

"I've never heard of anyone demanding their bracelet back before."

"I'm sorry. I was going to make Emilia a new one, but it's just, you know, I need it quickly and I don't have much time on my hands."

Dahlia thanked the gods from the bottom of her heart that she hadn't married this man. To think his new fiancée, new wife—whatever she was—would be receiving Dahlia's hand-me-down... She almost felt sorry for her. Silently, she cursed the wretched man.

"Fine then."

Selling the thing would just be a hassle anyway. She couldn't be bothered trying to wring the money out of Tobias either. All she wanted was for him to leave right now and never show his face here again.

"I'll go and get it. Wait there."

She shut the door and immediately raced to the third floor. She rifled through the jewelry box in her room, grabbing the engagement bracelet and a pair of earrings. She dropped them into the first bag she could lay her hands on, then

went back to the door and thrust them at Tobias.

“There, one engagement bracelet. You can take those earrings, too, while you’re at it.”

The slender gold bracelet was set with carnelian, the stones carefully matched to the chestnut and almond shades of Tobias’s hair and eyes. It was quite a chic design, and Dahlia had once been fairly fond of it.

The simple stud earrings featured round orange garnets.

In this kingdom, many people liked to wear jewelry such as pendants, earrings, rings, and so on, each with the color of their partner’s eyes or hair. These earrings had been a gift for her birthday last year. Tobias had cautioned her not to wear them while working, so she’d only put them on a handful of times. She had no interest in wearing them ever again, that was for certain.

Tobias nodded meekly as he took the bag. He then reached into his coat pocket and drew out a small white box.

“I’ll give you these back.”

They were rubies Dahlia had given him last year as a thank-you for the earrings. Though small, they were completely flawless and shone beautifully in the light. She’d gifted them to him as is so they could be set in a ring or bracelet when he’d decided what he’d like. But they were still untouched, glittering brilliantly in the little box just as they had on that day. A bitter smile twisted her lips as she took them back. Tobias’s interest in her had clearly waned a long time ago.

“I never wanted to hurt you. I’m truly sorry.”

As he stood there with his head lowered, Dahlia shut the door without a word.

She felt an intense burning in the back of her throat. Whether it was anger or grief, she couldn’t tell. She went straight to the workshop, where she erased Tobias’s name from the gate’s control panel. Now he would no longer be able to open it. She shoved the small box of rubies to the back of the nearest shelf, then rushed into the bathroom. She activated a magical device made with water and fire crystals, which began to pour hot water into the bathtub. She

threw off her clothes, climbed into the still-shallow water, and splashed her face several times.

No, no more moping. She couldn't break her promise to herself already. There was no need to cry over Tobias. He wasn't worth it, she reminded herself again and again. Once she'd calmed down a little, she got out of the tub and thoroughly washed her hair and body.

Here in the royal capital, houses had running water in the kitchens and bathrooms. This was all thanks to a steady supply of cheap water crystals. According to what Dahlia had learned from her father and while studying at college, about twenty or so years ago, the king had announced the Great Water Reform. The king's wish had been that no household in the land should be without an adequate supply of water. Research to find a solution had begun at once.

The viscount who was in charge of managing the kingdom's sewer network at the time had established a system to mass-produce water crystals. For his achievement, the title of earl had been bestowed upon him. To this day, he was responsible for most of the kingdom's water crystal production, and he had even extended his responsibilities to the distribution and purification of the capital's water, as well as the sewer network. Rumor had it that his successor was likely to be made a marquis.

Clean drinking water, flushing toilets, and enough water to take a bath every day if she wished—to someone like Dahlia, born and raised in Japan, these amenities were a godsend.

She climbed back into the bath and sat there gazing at her little store of water crystals. They were deep blue in color, egg-shaped, and small enough that she could easily fit four in the palm of her hand. The manner in which they were cut told you at a glance that they were magic crystals. Just one of these was enough to fill a bath with water several times over. They'd been mass-produced for many years now and could be bought for just a few copper coins.

Particles of magic existed in every corner of this world. To awaken their properties, Dahlia had learned, one simply had to discover the right process. And yet, so much about magic was still unknown. Take these water crystals, for

instance—were they simply concentrating moisture found in the air? Were they doing something truly magical and transporting water from somewhere else in the world? Or were they somehow creating it out of nothing? At present, there were no established theories or serious studies being done. When Dahlia had casually posed these questions to her professor of magical studies at college, they'd been delighted and eagerly invited her into the laboratories.

Along with materials from a variety of magical creatures, Dahlia often used fire crystals and air crystals in her work. She had money to spare now that her payment for the new house had been returned—it might have been just the right time to embark on a new project, this time using water crystals.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her soap sitting in its usual place. She'd been using it until now without giving it any particular thought, but it occurred to her that, while there was bar soap and liquid soap in this world, there were none of those little bottles that dispensed soap as foam. It seemed they were one of the many inventions that only existed in her previous world. She could more or less remember how they worked; she'd disassembled and reconstructed one before. While they weren't exactly magical, she felt sure they would be useful for bathing and handwashing if she could recreate them. She wondered why she'd never remembered them before.

I have to write this down.

Dahlia got out of the bath right away. Before she knew it, her thoughts of Tobias had disappeared like soap bubbles.





Early in the afternoon, Dahlia paid a visit to Irma at her salon. She gave a knock on the door and entered. Irma had just finished with a client who was on their way out.

“Thanks so much for yesterday, Irma. I brought you these; I thought they could be your dinner tonight.”

Dahlia placed a generously sized parcel of ham and sausages on the table in the reception area.

“Oh, thank you. Those look great, but there’s way too much! Why don’t you eat with us tonight?”

“That’s kind of you, but I have some work stuff to sort out. I’ll come another time.”

Just then, Dahlia happened to catch a glimpse of her reflection in one of the salon’s mirrors. Her thick, dark-brown hair was tied up in a simple fashion. Her face looked so tired, not a hint of makeup to brighten it. Even her black-rimmed glasses were dull. It was a very gloomy-looking young woman who stared back at her.

“Irma, do you have any more clients today?”

“No, that was the last one.”

“Well, would you have time to do me, then?”

“Of course! What’re you thinking?”

“Let’s chop it short. And...I want my natural color back.”

Dahlia’s natural hair was an intense, rich red. It was the same color as her mother’s, she’d heard, though she had no way to see that for herself.

Hair like a beautiful sunrise, like the darling crimson clovers—Dahlia remembered the maid who’d sometimes looked after her when she was a child praising her so. In truth, she wasn’t all that fond of the color. When she was little, she’d wanted sandy blonde hair like her father’s. Her eyes were the same color as his, and she’d thought her hair ought to match too.

“Gosh, it’s longer than I realized. How short do you want it?”

“I like to tie it back when I’m working, so just long enough for that.”

When Dahlia unbound her hair, she found it fell halfway down her back. She hadn’t realized how much it had grown either. Once she was seated comfortably in one of the salon’s chairs, Irma began carefully brushing her hair.

“You’ve got a little bit of a curl in it, so if we take it to just above your shoulders... Would about here be okay?”

“Perfect. I’m in your hands.”

Irma nodded, and then put a white cape around Dahlia and began to cut her hair. Irma’s skill was evident in the smooth and dextrous motions of her hands. For a few moments, the only sound in the room was the light snipping of her scissors.

“You’ve been growing out your hair ever since you got engaged, haven’t you?”

“Tobias wanted me to. He said my hair would look nicer long and dark. Dyeing it at home was getting to be a hassle, though, with how long it’s gotten.”

“Your natural color’s lovely, though. And it suits your skin tone.”

“It’s just that red can look so gaudy.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve heard that, you know. The more I hear it, the more it sounds like a pretext for something else.”

Irma frowned as she kept on cutting without pause. Strand after strand of Dahlia’s long hair floated down onto the polished wooden floor.

“I have clients come to me quite often after getting engaged or married, asking me to tone down their color. Nine times out of ten, it’s the husband who’s put them up to it.”

“I suppose they want to make the right impression on their in-laws, or people at work perhaps.”

“That’s what they often say, but I think the real reason is something else.”

Irma stopped for a moment, meeting Dahlia’s gaze in the mirror. Her earrings,

a pair of stones in a rich reddish-brown color, glinted in the light. They were the same shade as Marcello's eyes.

"A man who wants to dull down his wife's appearance is just showing his insecurity, don't you think?"

"Is that it?"

"Men like that think that if she looks too beautiful, then someone else might steal her away. If you ask me, a real man would have more confidence in himself *and* a lot more faith in his lady."

"Maybe you're right," Dahlia replied, nodding.

However, she couldn't apply this thinking to her own situation at all. Tobias had never once seemed concerned about Dahlia being taken from him. She doubted he'd even have minded that much if she had been.

Once Irma had finished cutting, they went over to the sink in the corner of the salon. Irma prepared some hot water with a water crystal and a fire crystal, dissolved in it a product for removing hair dye, then soaked Dahlia's hair in the solution. After that, she thoroughly washed it with shampoo twice and then rinsed it clean. Next, she combed a perfumed oil through the hair for shine before finally using a magical dryer powered by air and fire crystals. Soft, silky waves of rich red hair blew around Dahlia's shoulders.

Dryers were invented by Dahlia's father when she was a child. To be more accurate, they were a joint accomplishment between father and daughter. Back when she was just beginning her studies of magic, she had come up with a design for a small device that would blow warm air using air crystals and fire crystals. She'd made it in secret, hoping to surprise her father, but due to her inexperience, she'd had little idea of how to calculate the device's output. Thus, the result had been a compact but highly effective flamethrower. Even now, she could clearly recall her normally mild-mannered father's fury when she'd accidentally scorched the workshop wall.

After her scolding, she'd tearfully explained her design and what it had been intended to do. Not only had he understood, but the pair had spent the rest of the day and night refining the design, having a whale of a time as they experimented. By the next morning, they had created a perfect hair dryer. She

fondly remembered the maid coming in that morning and giving her father quite a tongue-lashing for letting his daughter stay up all night long.

“There, that suits you so much better.”

“Thanks, Irma. It’s so light; it feels great.”

The red-haired young woman in the mirror smiled. It had been two years since she’d seen her vivid natural color; it would take a little time to get used to it again.

“I don’t have any more bookings this afternoon, so why don’t we have some coffee?”

Dahlia happily agreed and followed her through to the kitchen.

“Are you sure you don’t need any help with the unpacking and everything back home?”

“No, that’s okay. There wasn’t all that much to begin with,” said Dahlia as she accepted a cup of coffee. She never took sugar, but today she added just a little.

“Marcello told me what happened yesterday. I’m sure everyone else has said the same thing, but you absolutely made the right choice.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Dahlia answered without reservation. “You know, he turned up at the tower this morning.”

“Who? You mean—oh, I don’t want to even say his name anymore. So, what did he want? Did he come to his senses and apologize? He didn’t beg you to take him back, did he?”

“No... No, he came to ask for my engagement bracelet back so he could give it to his new fiancée.”

“Bghk!”

All of a sudden, Irma’s coffee and her table were in a terrible state.

“A-Are you *serious*?!”

As the incandescent Irma choked on the coffee she’d inhaled, Dahlia hurried to pat her back.

“I’m sorry! I should have waited until you were finished drinking.”

“It’s fine, never mind that. What the *hell* was he thinking?! What would he even do with your bracelet? Take the stones out and put them in a new one?”

“I think he means to use it just as it is. Said there wasn’t time for him to make a new one.”

“I can’t believe he’d try to do something so stupid. Wait, Dahlia, you didn’t give it to him, did you?”

“I did, along with the earrings he got for my birthday.”

“Oh, but you should have sold them! You could’ve gotten a good price for those.”

Irma was right; she could have sold them for a tidy sum. Money was important, especially now. She had no family, no plans to marry. While she was gainfully employed, the costs of materials and research involved in magical toolmaking were quite steep. You could never have enough savings. It was just that, at that moment, all she’d wanted was to sever her ties with Tobias as quickly and cleanly as possible.

“I just didn’t want anything to do with him anymore; that was all I could think about. I know it was probably a bit of a waste.”

“Well, I can’t say I blame you. I don’t particularly want to see his face again either. And you don’t need him, anyway. You’re a fine craftswoman. If you keep working as hard as you have been, you’ll be just fine.”

Irma fetched herself a fresh cup of coffee and sat down. As she dropped in some sugar and swirled it around with a teaspoon, she glanced Dahlia’s way with a slightly forbidding look in her eyes.

“Hey, Dahlia...what d’you say we spread this story around a little? It’d teach that man a lesson. If I mentioned it to my clients, it’d be all over town in no time.”

“Don’t,” Dahlia replied firmly. “I don’t need everyone knowing I had someone like that for a fiancé. I couldn’t stand to have them all pitying me. No, I’m putting this whole affair into my dark past.”

“Your dark past, huh? Heh, I like it.”

That expression from Dahlia's previous world seemed to translate well here. Irma smiled as she poured Dahlia a second cup of coffee.

"You're right," Irma continued. "The sooner we forget him, the better. You'll find someone who deserves you. I just know it."

While Dahlia appreciated her friend's kind words, she couldn't quite bring herself to nod in agreement. Finding love, getting married... Somehow, she couldn't see herself doing these things anymore. On the contrary, they sounded like a huge headache.

"I'm starting to wonder if I really need to. I'm more interested in my work, to be honest."

"You do love crafting your tools, don't you?"

"I do. I don't think I'd mind devoting my life to my craft. Once I'm old and gray, I could take on a young apprentice and train them so they could surpass me one day. Something like that doesn't sound so bad."

"As your friend, I know I should probably try to talk you out of it, but you're right; that doesn't sound bad at all."

The two friends continued to laugh and chat together until it was almost dark.

A Knight from the Beast Hunters

The next morning, Dahlia set off to gather materials in the forest outside the royal capital. Her plans weren't ambitious—she only intended to gather some stones and sand close to the highway. She wasn't expecting to find any treasure. The thought of Tobias turning up again prevented her from getting settled in the tower; she didn't need any acquaintances quizzing her about the breakup either. She was unlikely to meet anyone out in the forest, and a day in the fresh air and quiet would be a nice change of scenery.

Since she would be going alone, she had decided to splurge a little on a sturdy, enclosed carriage with metal doors drawn by a specially trained sleipnir. The rental fee was understandably high, but sleipnirs were extremely useful travel companions, able to fend off any attacking marauders or smaller monsters with a single kick. The carriage featured a door behind the driver's seat that allowed you to quickly hide inside. Then, all you had to do was blow the whistle kept inside the carriage, and the sleipnir would draw you back to the city, even without anyone at the reins. You couldn't ask for a better escort. When she'd gone to book the carriage, there had just been a cancellation, and she'd grabbed the opportunity without hesitation.

The sky above was clear and beautifully blue. The birds sang, their melodies blending into one another, while the trees swayed gently in the breeze. The road into the forest was a little rocky in places, but in decent condition otherwise, and more than wide enough for the carriage. Dahlia felt her decision had been well worth it. She had driven the sleipnir very cautiously at first, but the animal was no trouble whatsoever. So smooth and comfortable was the journey that it almost felt as though it sensed her apprehension and was trying to put her at ease.

From what she had been told, it was very rare for monsters to appear in the area. Even so, she had prepared for the worst, just as her father had always taught her to. In her coat pocket, she had special magic crystals that could be thrown at monsters to repel them, and she had put on some protective

clothing. These measures would be just as effective against human attackers too.

After glancing around to check that the coast was clear, Dahlia took out a bottle of white wine from her bag and brought it straight to her lips. She took several gulps before letting out a hearty sigh of satisfaction. Although she knew it was an extremely unladylike way to drink, she had always wanted to try it. She hadn't realized how much stress she'd piled up over the last few days. Only now did she feel like she could finally breathe easy.

If she continued a little farther down this road, she would reach a river flanked by wide, flat pebble beaches. She'd collect some stones there, then perhaps take an early lunch while enjoying a pleasant view of the river. But no sooner had she had this thought than a flock of birds in the trees nearby screeched and took off all at once. The sleipnir whinnied and stopped in its tracks, lifting its foremost right leg as it stared into the trees. The gesture suggested wariness. There was a loud rustling from deep in the thicket on the right-hand side of the road. It wasn't some little bird or rabbit making that noise; it was a much larger animal, or perhaps even a monster. Dahlia gripped one of her throwing crystals tightly in her hand.

"A road...finally..." croaked a raspy voice. A moment later, its owner stumbled out of the bushes. They were human, and they were covered from head to toe in blood.

"A-Are you all right?!"

"Water... Please..." the man begged, kneeling on all fours. His voice was so hoarse that he could barely form words.

Dahlia hurriedly grabbed her waterskin from the carriage and brought it to him.

"Drink this!"

The man bowed his head in thanks as he took the water, gulping the entire contents down without even pausing for breath.

"You're a...lifesaver. Thank you..."

He promptly collapsed on the ground. His armor's breastplate was intact, but

the shoulder and back pieces had been ripped apart. The clothes he wore underneath were also in tatters, and there were several horribly deep gouges in his left shoulder and upper arm. His entire body was drenched in crimson.

“Are you okay?! What happened to you?!”

“I’ll be fine... It’s mostly...monster blood. Got separated from the others...on the mountain. Been walking...two days...”

He managed to lift an arm to point up at the peak of a snow-capped mountain. All Dahlia could think was that he was incredibly lucky to be alive. He’d mentioned others, so perhaps they were a party of adventurers.

“Wait there a moment.” Dahlia ran back to the carriage and retrieved a potion, pouring it into a wooden cup. “Here.”

“Thank you.”

The man accepted the cup and took a mouthful. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Is this...a potion?!”

“Yes. I’ve opened it now, so please drink it all down.”

Potions didn’t keep for long once unsealed. If he’d known what it was, he might have tried to refuse—that was why she’d poured it into a cup. One bottle of this potion cost five gilt silver (about fifty thousand yen, in Dahlia’s estimation). Rather expensive for a bottle of medicine, you might think, but its effectiveness in healing wounds made it worth every coin. You couldn’t put a price on a life, after all.

“I’m so sorry. I promise to repay you once we return to the capital.”

He bowed his head in thanks before swallowing the rest of the contents. As he took several deep breaths, the wounds in his upper arm began to close before Dahlia’s eyes, as though time were turning back. It was an extraordinary sight.

“I cannot thank you enough. I feel so much better.”

While there was certainly much more life in his voice, with all that blood covering his face, it was impossible to tell whether his color had improved or not.

“Forgive me, I haven’t yet introduced myself. My name is Volfred, and I am a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. I am but the youngest son of a minor noble, so please, call me Volf.”

Not only a knight, but a Beast Hunter at that.

All kinds of monsters roamed this world. They were generally hunted by adventurers, who made a living by selling the meat, skins, bones, and so on through the Adventurers’ Guild. However, when they began to pose a threat to human settlements—such as when their numbers grew too large, or an especially strong or large monster was discovered—then the royal Order of Beast Hunters was dispatched.

Attacks from packs of monsters, or larger-than-normal ones, were simply thought of as another kind of natural disaster in this world. It went without saying that taking on these ferocious beasts wasn’t for the faint of heart; the Beast Hunters’ ranks included many of the kingdom’s most formidable warriors.

“I’m...Dali. Just a citizen. I’m a jack-of-all-trades.”

Dahlia deliberately cut her name short to make it sound more like a man’s. She had draped her father’s coat loosely around herself today, and she wore a black hat that completely hid her hair, her black-rimmed glasses, a special choker that lowered her voice, and a gauze scarf around her neck.

It was just a precaution. A woman on her own in the forest had to be vigilant. Among nobles, it was common practice for men to avoid sharing a carriage with single women. Dahlia decided it best not to reveal her gender to the knight. Her priority for the moment was to get him back to the capital, and quickly.

“I’m terribly sorry to trouble you, Dali, but if you’re heading in the direction of the capital, may I ride with you? I’ll see that you’re repaid as soon as we reach the castle.”

“Of course. Please, climb on.”

“Thank you very much. I’m in your debt.”

Volf blinked several times and then rubbed his light-brownish eyes. Upon closer inspection, Dahlia could see that the whites of his eyes looked very bloodshot.

“Um, do your eyes hurt?”

“They’ve been like this since that beast’s blood got into them.”

The fact that the potion hadn’t healed his eyes meant that they weren’t injured; more likely, it was some kind of poison in the blood, or an infection. The blood covering his face must have been running into his eyes.

“You’d better wash them as soon as possible. I’ve heard of monsters causing blindness before.”

“It’d be twelve gold at the temple to have that healed. I would rather avoid it.”

There were doctors in this world, but serious injuries were generally treated by temple priests. Treatment wasn’t free; the cost increased with the severity of the condition, but if you could afford it, there was very little that couldn’t be cured.

“There’s a river nearby. Would you like to wash there?”

“Yes, please.”

When Volf stood up, Dahlia finally became aware of his considerable height. He looked rather slim, but that was likely just because he was so tall—around a hundred and ninety centimeters, Dahlia guessed.

“I’m sorry it’s a little cramped, but here, come sit beside me.”

Dahlia moved over to free up half of the driver’s seat.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to dirty the seat. I can walk to the river.”

“It’s covered in waterproof cloth. No need to worry.”

“Ah, I see. Well then, thank you.”

When the man climbed up onto the carriage, he did his best to squeeze himself into the corner so their clothes wouldn’t touch. Even so, the smell of blood was quite overpowering, and it was accompanied by a whiff of rot. The sooner he washed all this off, the better. Dahlia wished she’d brought some water crystals with her; all she had was the drinking water in her antiseptic waterskin.

“Very useful, this waterproof cloth.”

“You think so?”

No doubt Volf was just making small talk, but Dahlia suddenly felt her heart swell with pride. The inventor of this waterproof cloth was none other than Dahlia herself. She had developed it while still in college.

Vinyl and the like didn’t exist in this world, and she had no way of creating it. She had wanted a water-resistant material in order to make a raincoat for her father. The experiments she’d undertaken to create it had been the first steps toward this waterproof cloth. After much trial and error, she had eventually perfected the method: one side of the material was coated with a mixture of powdered blue slime and a certain chemical, then a fixing spell was applied so the mixture would stay adhered to the cloth. With that, Dahlia’s original waterproof cloth had been complete.

For a while, her roof and garden had been completely taken over with all kinds of slimes hanging out to dry, the floor cluttered with bottles for the powder. The new cloth had sold like hotcakes, to the point that adventurers had almost wiped out the area’s population of blue slimes. If blue slimes had emotions, she was sure they’d bear a hefty grudge toward her.

“When I first joined the knights, we used to paint our tents and cloaks with wax. It was a job they gave the new recruits, and it was quite tough. If you missed any spots, the water would seep through, so they used this thick cloth that could take plenty of wax. But that made it very heavy to carry, of course. Eventually, this new waterproof cloth came in. Much lighter, and no waxing needed.”

“I see. I’m glad it was useful.”

“Makes great raincoats too. Ah, a raincoat’s a kind of cloak with arms made out of that waterproof cloth. Since we started using those, far fewer of us have had problems with heat rash. Before, if it started raining, we had to use leather cloaks, even in the middle of summer.”

“Heat rash, you say?”

Dahlia had never considered that when developing her invention.

“Yes. No matter how itchy you get, you can’t scratch through your armor, and there isn’t much chance to bathe out in the field, you know? It can disturb your concentration, even in the midst of battle, so it’s no laughing matter.”

This was clearly a more serious problem than Dahlia had imagined. There was nothing better than direct feedback from the people using your product to show you where improvements were most needed. The gears had already begun to turn in her head—how could she make the fabric breathable and, if possible, lighter, while maintaining its waterproof properties?

“So, that cloth would be even more useful if it were lighter and more breathable?”

“It would be, if someone could make it that way. Of course, it’s still got to be durable, so I don’t imagine it’d be easy.”

She had to factor in durability too? This was going to take some experimenting, most likely with some new materials. She was getting absorbed in thought when Volf spoke again.

“Please excuse me, talking about myself all this time. Were you out here to do some foraging today?”

“Yes, just seeing what I could find.”

“I’m so sorry for getting in the way of your work.”

“Not at all. I was checking out the area today.”

As they exchanged polite remarks, the river came into view. This wide clearing had long been used as a rest area for travelers. Dahlia found a flat spot to park the carriage, and the two of them climbed down. Volf headed for the river’s shallows and began to wash his eyes and face. It appeared that some of the dried blood was quite stubborn, and it took a lot of splashing and rubbing before the man finally raised his head. Dahlia handed him a towel.

“Here, use this.”

“Thank you.”

He took the towel and dried his face before finally turning to face Dahlia again.

Her breath caught in her throat. His short hair, previously matted with blood and dust, was now a glossy ebony, contrasting his pale, flawless skin. His features were incredibly fine. His nose was long and straight, lips thin and shapely. Within almond-shaped eyes framed by long lashes, his rich golden irises gleamed like pools of whiskey, dotted by pupils as black as midnight.

Even including her previous life, he could easily be the most—or at least second-most—beautiful man Dahlia had ever seen. While she wasn't attracted to him in the conventional sense, she would have happily hung his portrait somewhere in the tower.

"The smell of blood might attract animals, so I'll bathe here and wash my clothes while I'm at it," said Volf, taking off his armor as he waded toward the middle of the river.

At the sound of splashing water, Dahlia promptly turned her back.

Dahlia returned to the carriage, where she prepared some water and grapes for the sleipnir. Sleipnirs were omnivorous, able to eat meat as well as fruits and vegetables. Dahlia had been told it would only need water this afternoon, but a few snacks would put it in a good mood and make it more amenable. According to the stablehand, this one adored grapes, so Dahlia had bought a large bunch.

As soon as it spied the juicy black grapes, the animal's dark eyes opened wide and it stared at her intently, following her every move. It was quite adorable, really. Not only had it guarded her well today, but it had helped save someone's life, so she decided to give the sleipnir the whole bunch. When the water and fruit were put down in front of it, it let out a whinny of delight.

After getting what she needed from the carriage, Dahlia set about lighting a campfire on the riverbank. She'd brought along a bundle of firewood and a magical tool for fire-starting, so it took no time at all. Once she'd checked the direction of the wind, she prepared spots for her and Volf to sit across from each other at the fireside. On the other side, a little ways from the fire, she thrust two long sticks into the ground and strung a rope between them. It was a simple clothesline for Volf to dry his clothes on.

While enjoying the tranquil sounds of birdsong and the flowing river, Dahlia

began to make lunch. She sliced a round, crusty loaf of bread, topped it with goat cheese, and placed the pieces beside the fire. Next, she skewered some cold sausages on sticks and set them near the flames as well. She had some dried fruit and nuts in a leather bag, but found herself short on dishes. A large leaf she found nearby served well enough as a plate. Luckily, Dahlia had brought more than enough food and wine with her today; neither she nor Volf would have to go short. She made it look as though she had more while trying to give the knight as much as he would accept.

Even in spring, bathing in the river must have been cold, Dahlia thought. She decided to heat the red wine, pouring it into a small pan and stirring in a little honey. Volf emerged from the river just as it was beginning to simmer. Dahlia didn't dare turn her head, relying on her ears alone as she spoke to him.

"If you'd like, you can hang up your clothes on that rope. You're welcome to wear that coat there until they're dry. It may be a little small on you, though; it's my father's."

There was a rustle of fabric behind her, then Volf appeared, clad in the black coat, and sat down beside the fire. The hems were indeed too short for him, but it was all she had to offer.

"I truly am sorry to put you through all this trouble."

"It's nothing."

Dahlia poured the red wine into cups and offered Volf some of the bread and sausages.

"Just some bits and pieces, I'm afraid, but I hope it's to your liking."

"Thank you, it looks excellent."

Realizing the well-born young man would probably be too polite to start first, Dahlia looked away and took a bite of the rye bread. The cheese on top had melted very nicely and was delicious with the hot wine. Being goat's cheese, it had quite a strong, distinct flavor, but it paired perfectly with the bread. Dahlia picked up one of the sausages, biting in without taking it off the stick. It was bursting with juiciness and exquisitely seasoned—the delicious mix of spices gave every bite a slightly different flavor. These would be ideal for enjoying with

a jug of ale.

After a few more bites, Dahlia stole a glance in Volf's direction to find him digging in with an appreciative smile. It seemed the food was to his taste; she was relieved. Within moments, he'd polished it all off. It felt nice to see someone showing such appreciation for their food.

"I don't remember the last time I enjoyed a meal so much," Volf said once they were finished.

If he hadn't eaten in two days, she wasn't surprised he felt that way.

The breeze blew gently as the two of them sat for a while, listening to the quiet rushing of the river and the crackle of the campfire. Dahlia poured Volf a second cup of wine. He accepted it with a word of thanks, but she noticed as he drank that he was blinking constantly.

"How are your eyes?"

"They don't hurt anymore. My vision's rather blurry in both of them, though."

"You'd best see a doctor as soon as we get you to the castle."

"Yes, I certainly will."

Just then, the breeze began to waft the smoke in a slightly different direction, and Dahlia glanced over at the makeshift clothesline. Thankfully, the smoke wasn't blowing toward it. Volf's dark-gray clothes swayed slightly in the breeze. If only she could use air magic, she'd have been able to dry them much faster, but alas, she had no affinity for it. As she looked away again, her gaze fell upon the battered armor lying on the ground. The shoulder pieces were missing, but the breastplate remained, and she now noticed its deep red color. It didn't appear to be merely blood.

"Sir Volf, you aren't one of the Scarlet Armors, are you?"

"I am, actually," he answered, quite casually.

The Scarlet Armors were a famous division within the Order of Beast Hunters. Those who wore the division's bright-red garb were the first to charge into every battle. The vivid color drew foes' attention, and these warriors often acted as decoys. Even when the order was overwhelmed in battle and on the

retreat, the Scarlet Armors would be hounded to the last. It was a grim statistic, but the members of this division were by far the most likely to die in battle.

“I’m not the strongest, but I’m quick and agile. Diverting the beasts’ attention away from my comrades is what I do best.”

“Oh.”

There was no sense of heroism in his calm smile. Even so, Dahlia was suddenly lost for words. A memory of the day her father died surfaced in her mind. It had been last year, when the leaves on the trees were just a little greener. They’d eaten lunch together just like always, then her father had left for the Merchants’ Guild. By the time the news reached Dahlia that he’d collapsed and she’d rushed to the guild, all that was left of him was a lifeless body. It had all happened so suddenly. One moment they had been talking happily; the next, he was gone. But why was she thinking about this now? As her mind dwelled on the bitter memory, Dahlia cast her eyes down, staring into her cup of wine.

“Wearing this coat reminds me of that craze that was going around last spring.”

“Craze?” Dahlia repeated, taking a sip of her wine.

“Yes. I was in town one day and took my coat off in front of a woman, completely forgetting I wasn’t wearing anything underneath. She must have thought I was one of those ‘flashers.’ I thought I’d be arrested.”

“Bfft!” A spray of red wine burst from Dahlia’s lips.

Even in another world, it seemed that the coming of spring brought all sorts of people out of the woodwork—including *those* types.

“Don’t say things like that when people are drinking!”

“Sorry! It just popped into my head,” the young man laughed with a dazzling smile.

Dahlia’s noble, knightly image of Volf had come clattering down in an instant.

“It always makes people so worried when they hear I’m a Scarlet Armor. I do appreciate the concern, but it’s not as dangerous a job as everyone thinks. You looked so sad just now; I wasn’t sure what to say... Sorry, it was stupid of me.”

“No, no, I overreacted.”

“I’m not great at formality; I hope you don’t mind. You don’t need to be so polite either.”

“Sure.” Dahlia deliberately made her reply a little brusque.

It seemed that absurd story had been his way of trying to make her feel better.

“Tell me, are you interested in magical tools, Dali?”

“I love them. I work with them all the time.”

Caught off guard by the question, Dahlia answered honestly before she could stop herself. Volf looked pleased to have hit the mark. His beautiful golden eyes glittered as he looked back at her.

“All right, then there’s something I want to know: I’ve never *seen* a civilian with one, but do magical toolmakers ever make swords?”

“I don’t think so,” Dahlia replied. “The closest thing you’ll find is probably something like an enchanted kitchen knife. It’s blacksmiths who make swords, and I think enchanting is usually the work of mages and alchemists.”

In this world, people who engaged in the magical arts could be roughly divided into three categories.

First, there were mages. Dahlia understood them to be like wizards, and they were generally gifted in offensive or restorative magic. The ones who specialized in offensive magic were often recruited into the army or became adventurers. Those whose talents lay in restorative magic might find employment in temples or also become knights or adventurers. There were a few mages who created magical tools, some of them even making a career of it.

Next, there were the alchemists. They excelled in using magic to create all manner of extraordinary items and substances such as potions, rare metals, and golems. Many of them had a knack for enchanting, thus they made magical toolmaking part of their livelihood too.

Finally, there were magical toolmakers. Their work was to skillfully fuse raw materials with magic to create various useful objects. They were generally the

ones without an affinity for offensive or restorative magic, or whose magical abilities were relatively weak. Sadly, they weren't generally afforded the same esteem as mages and alchemists. Even scholars and casual hobbyists could be found crafting magical tools. In short, no one considered it a particularly special occupation.

"What kinds of enchantments would you put on a kitchen knife?"

"The most common one would be an anti-rusting spell. Ah, the self-sharpening one's very popular too, though. It'd be one of those two."

"Anti-rusting and self-sharpening, huh? Those'd be useful on swords too."

"How is your sword enchanted?"

"The swords we use usually have a reinforcing spell on them. Not that it saved mine in the end."

"Oh, hold on, did you have a sword with you?"

Dahlia suddenly became worried. What if he'd lost it in the forest?

"It snapped off at the hilt when I stabbed the wyvern, so I just left it there."

"You were hunting a wyvern?"

Wyverns were a fearsome species of dragon. They were infamous for their sharp talons and tough, leathery wings. Dahlia remembered the gruesome gashes she'd seen in Volf's shoulder—a parting gift from his quarry, no doubt.

"Yeah, a red wyvern. Right after we killed it, another one appeared. We wounded it, then it grabbed me in its claws and flew up into the sky. The mages couldn't attack in case they hit me; the archers couldn't shoot either. I'll be getting an earful once I get back to the castle. I'll probably need to write a formal apology."

"Wow... It picked you up in its claws? It's a miracle you survived."

"Well, I stabbed it in the belly as hard as I could; it dropped me pretty quick then. It was the fall that worried me more, actually. But I had a strengthening spell on me and the trees broke my fall, so I was all right."

"Sounds dangerous enough to me."

“Strengthening spells keep you from getting too bashed up, and we have a great team of healers. We hardly ever lose anyone.”

“Hardly ever” meant it did happen sometimes, Dahlia noted.

“But getting back to what we were talking about—have you ever seen a magical sword, Dali?”

“I saw the Emberblade at the Merchants’ Guild. Nobody could draw it, though, so I’ve only seen the scabbard.”

If there was one item that reminded Dahlia she was living in a world of fantasy, it was these magical swords. Various arms and armor were inhabited by mysterious spirits, holy energy, the souls of departed warriors, and so on. They were immensely more powerful than ordinary arms and often had peculiar magical properties.

The Emberblade had been brought to the Merchants’ Guild some time ago to be sold. The scabbard and grip were both deep red in color and lavishly decorated with gold. Unfortunately, nobody had been able to draw the sword, so Dahlia had never seen the blade itself. It had gone to auction shortly after arriving and eventually sold for an incredible sum—one hundred gold coins. After the uproarious auction, the buyer had been revealed to be a famous adventurer.

“The Emberblade? Wish I could’ve seen it.”

“Have you seen many magical swords?”

“The one I see most often belongs to the captain of the Beast Hunters. It’s called Ash-Hand; anything it pierces burns up in an instant and turns to ash. It’s tied to the captain’s bloodline, so it’s been passed down through his family for generations. It’s one of the most famous swords in the kingdom. The captain’s the only one who can draw it. Anyone else gets burned if they even touch it.”

It sounded to Dahlia like a much more powerful version of the Emberblade. She got the feeling Volf was speaking from experience with that last comment.

“There are two other magical swords in the castle that don’t have owners. No one’s been able to draw them yet. I tried when I became a knight, but they wouldn’t budge.”

“Do you think it’s down to magical affinity? Or maybe some other special quality?”

“From what I’ve been told, the swords in the castle can only be wielded by someone with a pure soul and a strong sense of purpose. I’ve got neither, so it’s no wonder I couldn’t draw them,” Volf chuckled, his air so bright and carefree. “You know, I’ve never seen one myself, but I’ve heard there are swords in other kingdoms that actually *speak* to you.”

“A talking sword? It’d be good if you were taking a long journey on your own, I suppose. Or if you didn’t have any friends.”

“Dali, that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Well, maybe it could guide you on the road as well!” she added quickly, remembering speaking navigation systems in cars and smartphone maps.

“I think you want a talking map, not a talking sword.”

He had a point. Maybe Volf had an inventor’s mind after all. Feeling mildly curious, Dahlia decided to ask about other objects.

“Are there such things as talking shields or armor?”

“I’ve never heard of a talking shield. It’s possible somebody could have one hidden away somewhere. As for talking armor, well, there’s dullahan. Don’t think I’d want to wear one of those, though.”

“Have you ever seen one before?”

The dullahan, a living suit of armor with no head, was another one of this world’s fantastical denizens. It wasn’t a creature Dahlia would want to meet unexpectedly, but she yearned for a chance to observe one in safety. Just how did they work? What force was it that animated them?

“On one of our missions, we came across one in a cave. It warned us in this terrifying voice, ‘Turn back if you value your life!’ It was quite powerful, too, but we had a high priest traveling with us—he exorcised it. Five minutes and it was all over.”

“Just five minutes? I almost feel sorry for it. But what was it like, the dullahan? Was there anything inside it?”

“It was this big, black suit of armor without a helmet. It carried a longsword. All of it looked very well made. There was nothing inside it, though; it was completely empty. Once the priest had purified it, one of the mages took it back to the castle. They studied the armor and the sword, but they couldn’t find any clue as to how it moved. They were awfully disappointed.”

“I see...”

Dahlia understood the mage’s feelings well. She would’ve loved to discover the dullahan’s secret. Was it driven by some unknowable spiritual force? Did it have some unique way of manipulating magic that was beyond human capabilities? Even if its remains were truly nothing but empty armor and a sword, Dahlia would have given anything for the chance to dismantle them and investigate every inch. She thought it’d be fascinating to discover what they were made from.

“If it were up to me, I’d be happy to show it to you, but...”

She’d gotten lost in her daydreaming again and made him feel awkward. Scolding herself, Dahlia quickly shook her head.

“That’s okay. It’s fascinating just to talk about! It might even give me ideas for my work.”

It was then that she suddenly realized they were forgetting something—Volf’s eyes needed to be attended to as quickly as possible. Now was no time to be sitting around and chatting.

“We’d better get moving; it’s a fair distance to the capital from here,” she urged him.

“Of course. Sorry for talking your ear off.”

“No, I got carried away as well.”

Dahlia made sure to completely extinguish the campfire before covering it with earth. She then tidied up everything she’d brought from the carriage so as to leave the place just as they’d found it. Volf’s clothes were still somewhat damp, so they hung them from the carriage where they’d catch the breeze. His armor they packed away in the back.

Once they'd settled themselves in the driver's seat, Volf gave a big stretch. He hadn't slept since his escape from the wyvern, so he must have been exhausted.

"We'll be on the road for a while. You should sleep until we reach the city. I'll wake you once we're near the wall so you can change."

"I'm fine," Volf replied with a little shake of his head. "I think it must be because of the potion—I don't feel all that sleepy. Would you mind if we talked for a while longer?"

"Not at all."

As she took up the reins, Dahlia remembered the bottle of white wine she'd been drinking on the way here. When she opened the bag it was in, she found it had frothed up a bit from the rocking of the carriage. She wished she'd remembered it at lunch; she could have given all the red to Volf.

"Something wrong?"

"Just some white wine I opened earlier. I forgot all about it."

"I couldn't have a sip, could I?"

She'd already given him water and red wine, but after two days without anything to eat or drink, it was quite possible that he was still thirsty.

"Sorry, it's only my leftovers. You can have it all if you're still thirsty."

"It's me who should apologize; I'm drinking you dry here. It's just...white wine's my favorite," Volf admitted as he raised the bottle to his lips. Dahlia couldn't help but laugh at his honesty.

The pair spent the rest of the journey deep in conversation about magical tools and weapons. Dahlia explained all about the various magical tools used by the ordinary citizens of the royal capital, while Volf shared what he knew of the magical arms and tools in the royal castle. It was great fun sharing their knowledge with each other and discovering new things, so much so that the trip went by in a flash.

Dahlia stopped the carriage near the city gates so Volf could change into his clothes. Unfortunately, they were still not quite dry. Concerned that he would

be cold, Dahlia insisted that he keep the coat on as well. In the end, Volf hadn't slept a wink throughout the whole journey. Perhaps, Dahlia reasoned, it was in the nature of a knight to always be wary of his surroundings, even while enjoying a good conversation.

According to Volf, there was a building inside the castle gates with a permanently stationed guard. Volf would go there first and get the all-clear before heading on to the castle. It made sense—they would hardly let a civilian drive a carriage right up to it. This would be where they parted ways. Just as she stopped the carriage in front of the building, rain began to fall. Volf climbed down from the driver's seat and began to take off the coat Dahlia had given him, but she quickly stopped him.

"Keep it on. Your clothes aren't dry yet, and I'd hate for you to catch a cold. It's made from sand lizard skin, so it'll wick away the rain."

"Oh, thanks. I'll borrow it then. Thank you for everything, Dali. You saved my life today. Can you tell me your address? I'll come and repay you afterward."

"There's no need, honestly. You Beast Hunters are the ones out there keeping us all safe. Think of it as a show of gratitude."

"At least let me buy you a drink!"

Was that an invitation to be friends? Dahlia had very much enjoyed talking with Volf. She would've loved to meet and chat with him again. However, even though she'd had good reason, there was the unavoidable fact that she'd deceived him by allowing him to believe she was a man. It was unfortunate, but it would be for the best if their acquaintance ended here and now.

"Say hello if you happen to see me in town. Then I'll have that drink," Dahlia replied more cheerfully than she felt. She knew that the chances of a knight like Volf and her, a mere civilian, meeting again in this great city were infinitesimally small.

The downpour grew heavier. Volf said something, but she couldn't hear. It was at that moment that another carriage drew up behind her.

"I have to get going," she told him. "I'm blocking the road. See you!"

She felt bad, but she took the opportunity to cut the conversation short and

drove the sleipnir on.

“Goodbye, Dali!”

Only as he called out her name did his voice manage to cut through the heavy rain. As she drove away, the image of his beautiful smile lingered as though it were burned into her eyes. This day would be more fateful than she could know.



The royal castle lay in the north of the capital, surrounded by a towering wall of white stone. It wasn't an opulent construction; it had been built with defense and utility in mind, giving it a distinctly modern feel.

“Volf! Thank god you're alive!”

“Sir Scalfarotto, you're safe!”

“That's not a ghost I'm seein', is it?!”

As soon as he passed through the castle's great stone gates, Volf was greeted by dozens of men from the Order of Beast Hunters, all of them seemingly oblivious to the rain. As soon as they saw him, he was mobbed, his fellow knights jostling and crowding around him. In the chaos, someone kicked him in the back of the knee.

The knights of the Order of Beast Hunters were made up of nobles and commoners alike. There may have been differences in their social standing, but fighting side by side and risking their lives with every mission forged bonds of iron between them. Their unity was no façade; many of the men showed the same concern for one another as they would for their own families.

Behind the crowd gathered around Volf, a few knights and soldiers watched from a distance. A handful of maids and other women looked on too. It seemed all of them had come out to see Volf's safe return for themselves.

“I'm so sorry for worrying you all!” Volf called out to everyone, several comrades still hanging off of him.

It had been two full days since he'd been snatched up by the wyvern. Parties from the Beast Hunters had taken turns to search for him, but they had all but

given up hope by now. Apparently, after the third day, preparations would have begun for a hero's funeral. Volf could only keep apologizing profusely.

"How did you manage to get back here?" one of his friends asked, a hand tightly gripping his shoulder. Thanks to the potion from Dahlia, the wound that had been there had completely vanished.

"I stabbed the wyvern in the belly, and it dropped me."

"You what?! Volf, you're crazy! What happened to the wyvern?"

"I made sure it was dead, then I used my strengthening spell and ran down the mountain. Eventually I found the highway, and I met someone there who helped me. He even gave me a potion and drove me back here."

"Well, thank the gods for that. I really thought we'd lost you this time. Everyone's been worried sick, you know." Volf's friend, a man with dark-blue hair, sniffled loudly before raising his head with a broad smile. "Anyway! You're safe now, and that's all that matters!"

"Right. Sir Volfred and a wyvern flying off to die like lovers? It's not even funny."

"When I saw you being carried off, that's when I realized: lady-killers have it tough sometimes."

"You can bet that wyvern was a female!"

The men roared with laughter at the ridiculous jokes.

One after another, Volf's companions affectionately patted him on the head and shoulders.

"We'll get word out to the search party that you're safe. Oh, does your family know yet?"

"Not yet."

"Last they heard, you were carried off by a wyvern. They must be worried. I'll send a messenger to let them know you're back."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," Volf replied. Only then did it dawn on him that he'd completely forgotten about sending word home. His mind had been full of

other things.

“Well, you look all right, but are you really not hurt anywhere?”

“It’s just my eyes; the wyvern’s blood got into them and now my vision’s blurry. I’ll report to the captain and then go straight to the medical office. I’ll shower after that, then get some sleep. I need it.”

He’d washed in the river, but there had been no soap. A faint smell of blood still clung to his hair. The same went for his clothes.

“Damn, I hope the smell of blood hasn’t gotten into this coat.”

“You can always get it cleaned in the castle... Hm? Hold on, that coat’s not one of ours, is it?”

“No, I borrowed it from the person who found me. He said it’s sand lizard skin.”

“Sand lizard? That’s not what’s on the back of the collar. Let me see it.”

Volf’s friend pulled the coat off of him and studied it with narrowed eyes. After turning it inside out and staring at the lining for a few moments, he let out a deep sigh.

“The outside’s sand lizard, but look at this lining—this is wyvern skin. That’s a real luxury item. If you’re gonna use wyvern, you’d normally put it on the outside, where people can see it.”

“Only the best for the Scalfarottos, huh?”

“I told you, I borrowed it.”

“Just where did you go before you came back to the castle, anyway? Not that I blame you; if I had a woman, I’d probably drop in on her first, myself.”

“There is no woman. I’ll thank you not to make assumptions.”

Just as the conversation began to derail, one of Volf’s comrades, who was from a merchant family, took a look at the coat.

“You’d better return this as soon as you can. It’s made with finely cut pieces of wyvern hide held in place with enchantments. A coat like that doesn’t come cheap.”

“I see.”

“*Was* it a woman who lent you this, Volf?”

“No, it was the man who gave me a ride back to the city. He said it was his father’s.”

“Damn, well, don’t be surprised if that father comes after you waving a knife.”

“He couldn’t have known how valuable it is if he lent it to you just like that.”

“Maybe not.”

The somewhat hazy image of Dali’s face rose into Volf’s mind. The carriage the man had driven had been drawn by a sleipnir, not an ordinary horse. When he’d asked that they speak informally, Dali had obliged and seemed at ease. He’d been knowledgeable about all sorts of magical tools. Volf could only assume he was from a fairly wealthy merchant family. He had left without giving an address or taking a single piece of copper for his trouble. Volf could well imagine the young man getting a harsh scolding at this very moment from the coat’s owner, his father. The thought made Volf horribly uneasy.

“Nobody ’cept a noble would casually lend a thing like that.”

“No, he said he was a commoner.”

“Must have been a wealthy merchant then, or a relative, at any rate.”

“I didn’t get his family name, but I got his first name, at least. I’ll ask after him at the Merchants’ Guild. I have to thank him properly for what he did.”

“You told him you were from the Beast Hunters, right?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Well then, he’ll probably contact you! I’ll bet he wants to be friends.” The man laughed and slapped Volf’s shoulder.

“I’d be glad if he did. I’d like a chance to talk to him again...” Volf murmured. He looked like a young boy in a daydream as he smiled gently. No one would have guessed that this was the same man who’d been nicknamed the Bane of Beasts, the Black Reaper, and the Heartbreaker. His comrades were taken aback; they’d never seen him this way before.

“Hey, Volf, do you feel okay?”

“Something’s not right with Sir Volfred.”

“Someone go tell the captain; we’re taking him to the doctor right away! Must be some side effect of that dragon blood, or maybe he hit his head.”

“He’s not himself!”

With that, Volf was immediately escorted to the medical office.



“I’m very glad to see you’re safe, Volfred.”

“Captain Grato, please allow me to apologize for the great inconvenience I have caused the order.”

After finally being discharged by the doctor, Volf had come straight to the office of his commanding officer. A red-eyed man as imposing and solid as a boulder gazed at him from the other side of the desk. This was Marquis Grato Bartolone, captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. In spite of being near fifty, he didn’t merely command the order but still served actively on the battlefield.

“I hear you were taken to the medical office earlier. Were you wounded?”

“No, sir. The dragon’s blood has caused some inflammation in my eyes, that is all.”

The doctor had diagnosed him with nothing more than mild fatigue and anemia. The inflammation in his eyes was also mild; he had them properly rinsed and was given some eye drops. Even after the doctor’s assurance that there was nothing seriously wrong with him, Volf’s comrades had been making such a fuss that the doctor had lost his temper and shoed them all out into the hallway.

“Take a seat. Let’s hear your report,” said the captain, nodding toward the other side of the room where there was an area for receiving guests. The two men sat down opposite each other on the comfortable sofas, separated by a polished black table. It was only the two of them in the spacious room.

“My report is as follows. After I was captured by the wyvern, I stabbed it with my sword in midair and fell into the trees. I then confirmed that the wyvern was

dead. I spent the next two days running in the direction of the capital. When I reached the highway, I was aided by a civilian. He gave me a potion and food, then brought me to the capital by carriage. I sent word of my return from the castle's west gate, then entered the castle."

"You're a very fortunate young man. You are absolutely sure you killed the beast?"

"Yes, sir. I checked twice."

Grato nodded in satisfaction.

"A wyvern, eh? That's a species of dragon. Putting aside that it caught you and carried you off, the fact remains that you felled it single-handedly. You've earned the right to the title of Dragonslayer."

"But sir, the other men wounded it first. I'm sure it only fell because it was weakened. In addition, I wasted two days of the order's time by allowing myself to be captured. I'm willing to accept whatever punishment you deem fit."

He'd only mentioned the possibility of a formal apology to Dahlia, but he knew that consequences could have been extremely grave if he'd been unable to slay the wyvern and it had headed toward human habitations. He was sure he'd be in for a severe reprimand. However, Captain Grato shook his head.

"If you're positive you killed it, then there's no problem. On the contrary, with you being a Dragonslayer now, I'd be happy to recommend you for the Household Troops. How about it?"

"I must decline, sir."

"You're the only man I know who'd turn down an opportunity like that."

"If I'm recommended for the Household Troops, I may resign."

"Well, if that's how you feel, I don't intend to force you."

Seeing the seriousness in the young man's face, Grato gave a wry smile. He'd made the same suggestion once before when Volf had slain a colossal beast, but the young knight had refused just the same. To be selected for the Household Troops was supposed to be the dream of every knight, but it seemed to be the last thing Volf wanted.

“Now, I want you to tell me about when the wyvern snatched you up. Do you believe it was trying to use you as a shield?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. But if a beast were to do that, it would be very effective. Neither the mages nor the archers would be able to attack.”

“It’s the first time we’ve seen something like this on a mission. The last thing we need is those overgrown lizards picking up new tricks.”

Grato’s expression was grim as he ran a hand through his thinning, dark-gray hair.

“I will ask the men to attack regardless if I’m ever caught like that again.”

“Don’t be stupid. Would you have them shoot at me if I were caught? I won’t allow it. What we need to do is train the men to slay the thing themselves if they’re caught.”

“Yes, sir. Forgive me.”

In his heart, Grato sighed.

Volfred Scalfarotto was a young knight too handsome for his own good. He’d joined the order at seventeen and immediately expressed his desire to join the Scarlet Armors. Within only half a year, his wish had been granted. He’d participated in many perilous battles before today, yet never once had he sustained any serious injuries.

For the first few years, there were some who considered him a reckless fool, but not now. He held the highest respect of everyone in the order—and many outside it—for his great skill and valor.

Unusually for a noble, Volf had no ability in offensive or restorative magic. His sole magical talent was for strengthening spells. Aided only by that, he faced the enemy again and again without fear. He charged into battle, he attacked, he evaded, and so on as many times as he needed to until the battle was won. If it would hasten their victory or draw danger away from his comrades, he wouldn’t hesitate to risk his own life. It seemed like something beyond mere bravery at times—sheer recklessness, even an eagerness to die.

Grato’s first impression of Volf had been of a man overly keen for glory, or

perhaps harboring some fantasy of martyrdom. But after fighting at Volf's side countless times, he knew that wasn't the case. This man had no appetite for bloodshed. He had no fear. He had no interest in glory. Volf was purely, single-mindedly committed to fulfilling the role he had been given. It was no more complicated than that.

He thought nothing of fighting terrifying beasts because that was the order's purpose. He thought nothing of fighting at the vanguard, as a decoy, at the rear guard, the battle's most dangerous positions, because he was a Scarlet Armor. As far as he was concerned, that was his duty, nothing more or less. Grato was troubled by Volf's complete dedication to duty without concern for his own life.

"You're off duty until your eyes are completely healed. Take six days, starting tomorrow. You can return once the doctor clears you. If they don't get better, then go to the temple. The order will cover the cost."

"Understood. Thank you, sir."

Volf gave a little cough and straightened himself.

"Captain Grato, I would like to make a request."

"Let me guess, since you're a Dragonslayer now, you'd like your own magical sword?"

"It's not that, sir."

Magical swords were the only topic Volf ever brought up at times like these. Grato had shown his blade, Ash-Hand, to Volf any number of times. When Volf had first entered the order, Grato had warned the young man again and again that the blade would burn anyone other than himself. However, Volf had been absolutely adamant about trying it and, inevitably, had come away with a nastily burned hand for his efforts. If you knew something about magical swords, Volf would probably be happy to buy you drinks all night long.

Today, however, it seemed he finally had something else to ask.

"The man who helped me in the forest seems to have been a merchant. I would like a letter of introduction for the Merchants' Guild. I didn't have the opportunity to repay him for the potion he gave me."

“Did you forget to ask the name of his business?”

“No, he told me he didn’t need payment. He said to think of it as a show of gratitude for the order’s work. I wanted to speak with him further, but then another carriage came up behind him...”

“And he took off, did he? Might’ve had a good reason.”

At that, Volf frowned slightly. “What reason could there be?”

“Could have been harvesting illegally, or he could have been a foreign spy, for all we know. I don’t know what he’d be doing out west of the forest; there’s nothing there.”

“He didn’t seem like that sort of person.”

“Of course, there’s always the possibility that he didn’t want his wife or daughter meeting you.”

“I don’t...*think* that was it.”

Sadly, the hesitation in Volf’s voice betrayed that it was a distinct possibility. Grato had been half-joking, but it seemed he’d hit unexpectedly close to the mark.

This young man’s looks drew glances wherever he went. He was not only tall and handsome, but also blessed with a rare combination of black hair and golden eyes. The others often teased him for hogging all the good looks, telling him not to be selfish and to leave some for everyone else. Whether he liked it or not, Volf had an unmatched ability to attract women. Grato had heard from the men in the order that there was actually a manual in circulation for how to refuse demands for introductions to Volf from female relatives and friends. In all honesty, if Grato had a daughter, he wouldn’t have wanted to introduce them either.

“Even so, sir, I would like to find that merchant. I should at least thank him for his help.”

“All right. I’ll write you a letter right away, so just wait there.”

A slight aura of gloom had begun to emanate from Volf, rousing a little sympathy from the captain. He went straight to his desk and began to write.

Once finished, he used a dryer to set the ink on the parchment.

“I’ll pray you find your benefactor.”

Volf took the letter held out to him and bowed deeply. Then, his footsteps a little slower than when he’d come, he left the office.

“If Dali does have a wife at home, I’m sure we could meet in a bar or something.”

Only the hallway walls heard the young man’s whisper.



Dahlia placed a fresh fire crystal into her magical lantern and hung it up in the workshop. The rain outside still hadn’t relented.

Dahlia’s grandfather had been the first to devise this type of lantern. He’d converted them to use fire crystals instead of oil and made them more compact and efficient. Just one crystal could provide light for a long time, making these magical lanterns indispensable for travelers and night watchmen. Back when her grandfather had first created them, oil had been the cheaper fuel, but fire crystals had since become much more readily available. Oil lanterns and magical lanterns now cost about the same to run. The former were cheaper to buy, but the latter were safer and easier to maintain.

The most rapidly evolving area of magical toolmaking was in tools for the home. It was becoming similar to the consumer electronics industry Dahlia remembered from her past life. The variety and accessibility of these products had surged since her grandfather’s time. Her father had chalked it up to advances in research on magic crystals and their wider availability. It seemed that regardless of whether their world was fantastical or mundane, people naturally felt compelled to invent and develop tools to make their daily lives easier.

From fridges and freezers powered by ice crystals to ventilators made with air crystals, to home heating and magic-assisted stoves made with fire crystals, homes were now filled with all manner of magical tools. As was to be expected in a world filled with magic, there were also some tools that had no equivalent in Dahlia’s past life; for example, there were anti-eavesdropping devices often

used by nobles, and there were tools used when battling monsters to prevent afflictions like petrification and confusion. She still had much to learn about how these functioned.

One of the most surprising magical tools Dahlia had come across were those that prevented poisoning. It turned out they had a popular use beyond protection against certain monsters. Simply by wearing one, you could eat poisonous plants and animals as delicacies without coming to harm. Each kind of poison needed to be handled with the appropriate care, of course, but in the right amounts and combinations, nearly all of them could be enjoyed safely. Dahlia had been quite shocked the first time she'd seen someone put on a detoxifying bracelet and bite into red mushrooms and bright-blue fish with relish. If nothing else, these tools were a reminder that human appetites could be a powerful driver of invention.

Dahlia lined up a variety of parts on her workbench and began to formulate ideas, jotting down notes on a piece of unbleached paper. In this kingdom, plant-based paper and writing implements were readily available, if somewhat expensive. The pencil-like implements were made by wrapping a thin charcoal core with hardened paper. Contracts and such had traditionally been written upon parchment, but Dahlia had heard at the Merchants' Guild that paper documents were becoming increasingly common.

Ever since the day after breaking off her engagement, Dahlia had had a certain invention in mind: the foaming soap dispenser. While it didn't involve any magic, it would be a refreshing and nostalgic little project.

The main parts that made up the dispenser were the bottle, the upper part of the cap that pushed down, the lower part of the cap, and the pump mechanism inside it. Pushing the upper part of the cap down would exert pressure on the contents of the bottle, drawing the liquid up the pump's tube and through a fine mesh filter, which would turn the liquid into foam before dispensing it. The cap needed to not only push down but to come back up again on its own, so Dahlia would need to insert a spring as well. She'd had experience taking apart and reassembling these dispensers in college, and she had seen schematics at the company she'd joined after graduating, so she had a general idea of how they worked. She decided to try making a prototype.

As she set to work, Dahlia was keenly reminded of what a useful force magic was. With her magic, she could adjust the hardness and shape of the materials as she created parts for her tools. This world had all the same metals as the one she'd inhabited before, as well as others like mythril, spiritsilver, and orichalcum. There was no plastic, but some materials derived from slimes and krakens had similar properties. Dahlia had learned the basics of how to combine materials in her high school classes, but there was a lot to be gained from experimenting with unusual combinations and processes. It was something Dahlia never tired of. She was in her element here in the workshop, trying and testing her way to new crafting solutions.

She scribbled down notes as she molded the parts, refined them with magic, and checked them thoroughly before assembling them. As the night drew in, the workshop was lit up with shimmering, multicolored sparks—that special light that shone from the hands of a magical toolmaker at work. She disassembled her creation, remade parts, reassembled, and took notes. She repeated the process again and again, her attention focused solely on the objects in front of her.

Dahlia's magical ability was fairly potent for a commoner. Her ancestors had been magical toolmakers for generations, and her mother had been of noble birth, so it wasn't particularly surprising. Dahlia remembered nothing of her mother, not even her face. She had seemingly been a force of nature, all but forcing Dahlia's father into marriage. When the time had come for Dahlia to be born, she'd returned to her family home. Dahlia's father never saw her again. Only his newborn daughter had been returned to him, and she'd stayed with him all her life. She only knew of these events from the roundabout explanations the maid had given her; she didn't know the details. However, the fact that her father had never contemplated remarrying or uttered a single bad word about her mother was perhaps telling enough.

Though her magical power was strong for someone of humble birth, by the time Dahlia had reached high school, she was only average among the students. She couldn't hold a candle to the abilities of high-ranking nobles. When she'd heard about the impressive feats the mages could achieve, she'd found herself wishing for some sort of magic cheat code—if reincarnation was possible, why

not that? However, there was an advantage to having weaker magic. Rather than letting it out all in a powerful burst, people like Dahlia had the ability to express their magic steadily over time. This skill was ideal for a magical toolmaker; it came in handy when crafting and refining delicate parts. At times like these, Dahlia felt extremely thankful for her abilities.

Hours flew by as Dahlia worked through trial and error, gradually perfecting her creation. Making the pump and fine-tuning the spring took longer than expected; it was almost dawn by the time she finished, but she had managed to produce two satisfactory prototypes. All that was left now was to go to the bathroom, find the right strength of soap to produce a good foam, and make adjustments as needed.

Taking a breather, Dahlia finally reached for the glass of wine on the side table that she'd poured some time ago. It had gone disappointingly tepid. She'd intended to buy red wine on her way back from returning the hired carriage, but she'd ended up picking up a bottle of white instead. As the wine flowed down her throat, her thoughts turned to that young man who'd talked to her so enthusiastically about magical swords. They'd spent only a few hours in each other's company, but what a pleasant time it had been. Even now, the mere memory brought a smile to her face. If only she'd been a man, or if Volf had been a woman, she wouldn't have hesitated to give him her address. Their chances of meeting again in this sprawling city were almost nil. Even if they did, it was very possible that he wouldn't even recognize her.

Resigning herself to the reality that she was unlikely to ever see him again, Dahlia offered a little prayer for Volf's recovery.

"Please let Sir Volf's eyes get better again."

The Senior Apprentice

The next day, just after noon, Dahlia paid a visit to the Merchants' Guild. She and Tobias had been working together under a joint registration, but now she was on her own again. She'd intended to take some time off work after getting married, but there was no longer any need for that. First, she would check her earnings from the magical tools she had registered with the guild, then she'd find out what new work was available. She made her way through the hubbub on the first floor and ascended the stairs.

"Ah, Miss Rossetti. Excellent timing." As soon as Dahlia reached the second floor, she was greeted by the manager in charge of orders. "An order's just come in for you from the Couriers' Guild. They would like ten large waterproof covers for their carriages."

"Understood. May I see the order?"

"Certainly, here you are."

Dahlia carefully read it over, confirming that it was for the same material and dimensions they had ordered last time. She assumed it must have been Marcello who had put in the order as a favor to her. They would supply the cloth needed, and there was no issue with the delivery date or funds—Dahlia accepted the job without hesitation. She arranged to have the cloth delivered to the tower in a few days' time.

Relieved to have found work so easily, Dahlia went to the contracts desk.

"Hello there, Miss Dahlia."

"Hello, Ivano. Thank you so much for your help the other day."

Manning the contracts desk today was Ivano, the man who'd been one of the witnesses to the breaking off of her engagement the other day. He seemed relieved to see the cheerfulness in Dahlia's face, which he met with a smile.

"It was my pleasure. What can I do for you today?"

“I’d like to check my earnings for the magical tools I have registered with the guild. Could I see the contracts, please?”

“Certainly. I’ll fetch them for you right away.”

Ivano briefly disappeared into the back offices, returning with a flat wooden box in his hands. This box contained all the contracts for the various magical tools both Dahlia and her father, Carlo, had registered with the guild. When a toolmaker registered their invention, it meant they would receive a set amount of profit from the item’s sales, depending on how well it sold. While there were a number of differences, the system was similar to how patents had worked in Dahlia’s previous world. The maker would receive royalties on the item for seven years from the day of registration.

Dahlia had registered her waterproof cloth when she was eighteen, so she would be earning profits from it until she was twenty-five. The dryer that Dahlia and her father had created together had been registered ten years ago, so the contract on it had already expired. Unfortunately, the minimum age to register an invention was fifteen, so Dahlia’s name had never been on that contract to begin with.

“We have two contracts from your late father, and from you we have the contracts for your waterproof cloth and raincoat. Here is the sum of your royalties.”

After examining the documents, Dahlia cocked her head.

“What about the compact magical stove I registered last month? I don’t see it here.”

“The magical stove... Oh, I apologize, it is missing. Must be a clerical error; I’ll just go and check for you.”

Ivano stood up with a clunk of his chair. Perhaps the contract had been put into the wrong box by mistake. Dahlia settled into her seat and was waiting patiently when she heard a commotion from the back.

“I’m so sorry! I was the one who handled the registration for the magical stove!”

A young woman rushed out from the office and bowed deeply to Dahlia.

“I drew up the contract in Mr. Orlando’s name!”

“What?”

The young clerk was beside herself, almost in tears. Ivano appeared from behind her and hurried to the desk with the documents in hand. At a glance, she could see that the contract for the compact magical stove she had made was in Tobias’s name. That stove had been entirely her creation, from the initial concept to its manufacture. The only involvement Tobias had had was to check her blueprints for errors. She remembered the day she’d meant to register the stove; she’d been swamped with work at the time and Tobias had had business at the Merchants’ Guild, so she’d entrusted the task to him. It seemed he’d taken it upon himself to register the stove as his instead.

“You see, when Mr. Orlando came to register the stove last month, he assured me that he had your permission to use his name. I knew you were to marry soon, so I assumed you had decided to use your future husband’s name from now on...”

By all rights, the contract should never have been registered to someone whose name was different than the one on the specification document. Either Dahlia herself should have been consulted, or Tobias should have been asked to show a power of attorney. However, it was true that at the time, the two of them had been engaged to be married and working under a joint registration with the guild. It wasn’t unreasonable for the clerk to have made the assumption.

Dahlia felt a familiar headache coming on. It certainly wasn’t unheard of for married couples to both register their inventions under one name; it made finances much simpler. However, Tobias had never once mentioned anything like that to her.

“I understand what’s happened. However, I never at any point gave Mr. Orlando the rights to my invention. Furthermore, we are no longer engaged; we have no relationship of any kind. Can you tell me what needs to be done in order to correct the name on the contract?” Dahlia asked calmly, refraining from blaming anybody for the error.

“Please allow me to apologize as well; we are truly sorry for this oversight,”

said Ivano with a bow. “If you would be so kind as to wait here, I shall go and request instructions.”

If you send a creation out into the world, then you carve your name into it and take responsibility for what you have made—that was what Dahlia’s father had always taught her. It seemed Tobias, his former apprentice, had forgotten that lesson. That saddened Dahlia more than anything else.



A short while later, Ivano escorted Dahlia to the office of the vice-guildmaster, Gabriella. With its luxurious, geometrically patterned carpet, beautifully carved white table, and white leather lounge suite, the room was designed for ease and comfort. However, the air at that moment was horribly tense. Gabriella rose from her seat as Dahlia was shown inside.

“I’ve heard the whole story,” she said. “Dahlia Rossetti, in the guildmaster’s absence, I offer my sincerest apologies on behalf of the Merchants’ Guild.” Gabriella bowed deeply and did not move from that position.

“Vice-Guildmaster, please, there’s no need for that!” Dahlia insisted, flustered. Gabriella’s gorgeous ivory-white hair was almost brushing the surface of the table. Regardless, the woman did not move for several seconds. When she slowly straightened up at last, she let out a despondent sigh.

“I really can’t apologize enough. I never dreamed we would put you in such a position. I shall certainly ensure this never happens again without the proper procedure.”

Gabriella beckoned for Dahlia and Ivano to join her and take a seat at the table. Ivano, already looking fatigued, laid out the documents and began to explain the next course of action.

“I have examined the documents related to the compact magical stove, and there is no question that the blueprints and specifications document are written entirely in your hand, Miss Dahlia. We also have the testimony of the staff member who accepted the registration. As such, we are in a position to immediately file an official objection against Mr. Orlando and correct the name on the contract. As a penalty, Mr. Orlando will be temporarily barred from entering into any contracts with the guild, and the staff member responsible for

this error will be demoted for—”

“As long as I can have the name corrected, that’s enough,” Dahlia interrupted.

Ivano stared at her in disbelief. “Are you sure?”

“You’re well within your rights to sue for fraud, you know,” Gabriella added. “Since this occurred while you were still engaged, there will no doubt be some dispute over who said what. However, if you’d like to pursue action, we will be more than happy to appoint an attorney for you. And we will cover all expenses, of course.”

“I appreciate your consideration, truly. But if I were to do that, it would mean the end of his career as a magical toolmaker.”

“Indeed. Were he to be found guilty of contract fraud, the Merchants’ Guild would certainly never deal with him again,” Gabriella confirmed, slightly narrowing her dark-blue eyes. “You cannot still be fond of him, surely.”

“As my former fiancé, no. Quite the opposite, in fact. But...he was my senior apprentice.”

Tobias had begun his apprenticeship under Dahlia’s father at age nineteen, immediately after graduating from college. When she’d first met Tobias, her father had introduced him as her senior apprentice. With a clock in one hand and a sheet of metal in the other, he’d awkwardly bowed to her. She remembered thinking it rather unfair that he should be called her senior—she’d been learning her father’s craft since she was a little girl, after all. But she had only officially become his apprentice two years after her college graduation, having spent time as an assistant to one of her professors. In that sense, Tobias was indeed her senior.

“If he were to cancel the contract voluntarily and then I re-registered the product, could Mr. Orlando and the staff member both be spared the penalties? I don’t mind if the past month is deducted from the registration period.”

“If that’s what you wish, then we cannot object,” Gabriella replied.

“Then I’ll go and see Mr. Orlando right away and request that he cancel the contract.”

“We can summon him here instead if you’d prefer. Or I’d be happy to accompany you.”

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine on my own. That said, if things become complicated, I’ll take your advice on how to proceed.”

“Complicated, hm? All right, then.”

Dahlia said her thanks and set off immediately, leaving Gabriella and Ivano standing side by side in silence as they watched her go.

“I don’t believe she has any lingering fondness for him. Indeed, I wouldn’t blame her if she wanted to punch him in the face, yet there she goes. Is that how things are between apprentices?” the man mused.

Gabriella smiled weakly. “I don’t think it’s that. I’m not sure if she’s aware of it, but the one she’s trying to protect is probably Carlo.”

“Her father?”

“Yes. If his apprentice, Tobias, were to give up the craft or have his reputation tarnished, Carlo’s good name might be tarnished too. Or perhaps it’s just that he’d be disappointed. I think that’s what’s going through her head, even though she might not be conscious of it.”

“I see. That does make sense, in a way.”

Ivano looked away and closed his eyes for a moment. He was remembering a man with sandy hair and a warm, gentle smile—a magical toolmaker in the prime of his life. When he’d suddenly collapsed in a hallway of the guild one early summer day, Ivano had been the first to run to his side. After only a few ragged gasps, without even any final words, he had gone still before Ivano’s eyes. By the time the doctor arrived, the man was already long gone, beyond the help of anyone.

“Carlo... He was still so young. He must have felt such regret.”

“He should have had another twenty years. Ten, at the very least, before he passed on.”

Gabriella went to the window and opened it to let in some fresh air, though barely a breath came in. She stood gazing down upon the street, watching

Dahlia's retreating back.



Dahlia decided to go to Orlando & Co. on foot, as it was only a few minutes' walk from the Merchants' Guild. Though made of wood, it was a fairly substantial building with three floors. Dahlia was intimately familiar with the place. After the death of Tobias's father, she had come here often to help Tobias sort through all the company's records and accounts. The moment she stepped inside, several heads turned to look at her. As soon as they realized who she was, the onlookers' gazes became tinged with a mix of emotions—curiosity, sympathy, and here and there, scorn. Quashing the urge to turn tail and run, Dahlia stood upright. She remembered the promise she'd made to herself the day her engagement ended. She wasn't going to let a thing like this get her down.

"Why, hello there, Miss Rossetti."

A woman approached her with a very wooden smile. It was Tobias's mother. Just a few days prior, she'd happily called Dahlia by her first name.

"I'm awfully sorry things didn't work out. What with Emilia being related to Lord Tallini, it just didn't make sense for us as a company to stand in their way... Besides, the engagement between you and Tobias was only a matter of convenience, wasn't it? I'm sure you'll find someone else who'll make you very happy."

Dahlia could tell she was being pitied, yet it was also abundantly clear that the Orlandos were taking no responsibility for recent events. It was amazing how things changed as soon as nobility was involved. It took all of Dahlia's might to maintain a neutral expression.

"Yes, well, it's water under the bridge now. I have a matter relating to the Merchants' Guild that I need to discuss with Tobias. Is he in?"

"The Merchants' Guild? Of course, you two must have some unfinished business. I'll fetch him for you."

The woman seemed reassured by Dahlia's calm demeanor. She had a clerk summon Tobias immediately.

“Dahlia? Do you need something?”

Tobias appeared, looking uneasy. Well, she could hardly expect him to greet her with a smile, considering all that had happened between them in the last few days.

“I’ve come to talk to you about the contract for the compact magical stove.”

“Oh... Oh, that!” The color drained from Tobias’s face, and he looked around in obvious discomfort. “Sorry, can we talk about this in private?”

He ushered Dahlia into the nearest reception room. Once they were seated on opposite sides of the table, Tobias bowed his head low.

“I’m sorry, I completely forgot to tell you about that. It’s just a misunderstanding, I swear.”

“What are you talking about? I heard what happened from the person who took the stove’s registration. You told her you had my permission, so she registered it without confirming with me.”

“Erm...it’s because I planned for us to have our own company once we were married. I thought it’d be easier if we put everything under my name.”

“You mean that once we were married, you intended to register everything I made under your own name?”

“Well, yes. We’d be working together as a company, so I thought we’d either use my name or both names on everything...”

Ever since the day they’d broken off their engagement, Dahlia had been exasperated with and bitterly disappointed in Tobias many times over. However, the cold fury she felt now was a first.

“If you send a creation out into the world, then you carve your name into it and take responsibility for what you have made—that’s what father always taught me.” Her emerald eyes were icy as she stared Tobias down. “I wouldn’t have minded so much if you’d used both names, but yours alone? If one of my tools registered in your name turned out to be faulty or, gods forbid, caused an accident, how would that information get back to me?”

“I’d just tell you myself if that—”

Tobias halted and stiffened. He was being far too casual with someone who was as good as a stranger now.

“Cancel the contract for the compact magical stove today, please. Once you’ve done that, I’ll re-register it myself.”

“I’d... rather not...” To do that would mean admitting his own misdemeanor. His working relationship with the guild would be damaged. “This all happened while we were still engaged. How about we say I had your permission, keep the contract as is, and I buy the rights to the stove from you? You can name your price—the company will buy it.”

“No, thank you. If you wait until an official objection from the guild, there will be serious consequences. I’ve been told I’m also within my rights to sue for fraud, if I wish.”

“But you wouldn’t do that...would you? Are you that bitter about the engagement after all?”

Dahlia dropped her gaze and sighed deeply. “It’s not about the engagement. What bothers me is a self-respecting toolmaker like you putting your own name on something you didn’t make. As your fellow apprentice, I’m disappointed in you.”

“My fellow apprentice? Right. I see. That’s all I ever was to you, right?” Tobias looked away, his hands clasped tightly together. “And there’s nothing I can say to make you hand over the rights to the stove?”

“Nothing whatsoever.”

“Even if Orlando & Co. were to stop doing business with you?”

“That’s correct,” Dahlia answered without a moment’s hesitation.

She had been prepared for that possibility from the start. She could find another supplier. If she spoke to the Merchants’ Guild, they would be able to put her in touch with another trading company. If that didn’t work out, she could concentrate her business with the client base she’d built up with the sales of her waterproof cloth. She could even switch to selling her services in processing raw materials. Her income might take a hit, but she was confident she could survive. If she was going to make it on her own as a magical

toolmaker, she couldn't shy away from this challenge.

"Besides, your new bride wouldn't want you to keep any ties with me, would she?"

Dahlia hadn't noticed her in the office, but she knew Tobias's new fiancée was here in this building somewhere. She sincerely hoped she wouldn't have to see them together.

"Dahlia..."

"I expect you to resolve this matter at the Merchants' Guild by the end of the day."

With that, Dahlia stood up from her chair. Her vivid red hair swished around her shoulders as she turned on her heel, leaving Tobias stunned as he stared after her. He could barely believe this was the same Dahlia he'd always known.



Left alone in the silent room, Tobias slumped into his chair. Why had it turned out like this? He knew he was the one at fault, but this all felt like too much.

Dahlia was the daughter of Carlo, the man who'd been his master in magical toolmaking. He and Dahlia had first met in the workshop at the Green Tower. Carlo had introduced Tobias as his apprentice, and Dahlia had timidly bowed to him. She'd struck him as a very subdued-looking woman—plain, if you were to be less kind.

They'd only really begun to talk when she'd started working on her waterproof cloth. She'd been drying slimes all over the roof and in the garden; clouds of slime powder had filled the air, making him cough. He'd fondly watched over her as her senior apprentice while she threw herself into her research with almost childlike enthusiasm.

But then, when Dahlia was only in her teens, she registered her waterproof cloth and raincoat with the Merchants' Guild and gained her first contracts. At the time, Tobias still hadn't gotten a single one, and suddenly the role of "senior apprentice" began to weigh that bit more heavily on him.

Their engagement came about not due to mutual affection, but at the urging of their fathers. When Carlo first approached him with the proposal, he

accepted with little hesitation. If he was honest, it may have been the prospect of becoming Carlo's successor, rather than Dahlia's husband, that attracted him more. It was only when they'd stood together as a couple that he'd noticed Dahlia's height.

"You're awfully tall, aren't you?" he'd commented, letting his discomfort slip out.

She hadn't replied.

After they became engaged, whenever he wanted Dahlia to do something, she almost always would. She would question him about a request from time to time, but she never once pushed back. It seemed Dahlia respected him as her senior and would be the kind of wife to follow him one step behind, quietly supporting him.

Then came the sudden death of his father, followed a year later by Carlo's. After his father had passed away, Dahlia had often come to help with the day-to-day business at Orlando & Co. Even when Carlo passed as well, Dahlia had soldiered on without any kind of complaint.

At some point during all this, Tobias found himself becoming irritated with her. He kept asking more of her. He told her to dull down her wardrobe. He told her not to drink more than two glasses of wine. Whatever he asked, she did it. That was why he was convinced that she'd agree to what he'd done with the contract, even if she only found out after the fact. Thinking back, Dahlia had never asked anything of him or imposed upon him in any way.

There was a simple explanation. All along, she'd thought of him only as her senior apprentice, nothing more. She'd become engaged to him only because her father, their master, had said she should. She would probably have agreed to it no matter who he'd been. In fairness, he would probably have agreed to marry Carlo's daughter regardless of what she'd been like too.

Emilia had changed everything. This petite young woman had just appeared at the company one day. She had light, honey-colored hair and bright brown eyes. She made mistakes now and then, but she always worked her hardest.

"Goodness, a magical toolmaker? That's amazing!"

He couldn't forget the way Emilia's eyes had sparkled when he'd first spoken to her.

She was the daughter of a nobleman and his mistress. Her parents had been forbidden to marry and forcibly separated. Due to her mother's ill health, Emilia had been forced to quit high school to care for her. Since her mother's death, she'd been scraping by on her own. She was looking forward to learning the ropes and doing her best at the job, she'd said. Before Tobias knew it, he was smitten. He wanted to support her like an older brother and gave her advice wherever he could.

There was something Emilia happened to say in conversation, just a few days before Tobias was to register his marriage to Dahlia:

"I've always lived in rented rooms. I've never even seen inside a family home before."

Tobias invited her to live in the new house on the spot. Then the young woman burst into tears and confessed that she was in love with him, and in the end, Tobias found himself proposing to her. It was wrong of him; he understood that. And yet, no matter how many times he thought back on it, he couldn't imagine himself doing anything different. Emilia was the one—the *only* one—to whom his heart belonged.

He had been sitting in the empty room deep in thought for some time when there was a timid knock at the door. He invited whomever it was to come in. The door opened, and the young woman who'd starred in his reflections crept hesitantly into the room.

"I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Oh, Emilia... They told you to stay in the back until Dahlia left, did they?"

Emilia had just happened to be out of the room when Dahlia had arrived. It seemed she'd been ushered away and told to stay out of sight. Thankfully, she'd only come out once she was sure the coast was clear. The last thing Tobias wanted was for Emilia and Dahlia to meet.

"I'm sorry Tobias, I couldn't help worrying... Could I...Could I ask what she came to talk to you about?"

Her bright brown eyes glistened; she looked terribly uneasy.

“It was about our toolmaking work. The engagement’s all taken care of already; you don’t need to worry.” Tobias forced a smile.

Emilia cast her eyes down and clasped her hands tightly. Upon her wrist gleamed a gold bracelet set with carnelian stones the same color as Tobias’s eyes. Even though it had belonged to Dahlia first, Emilia had been overjoyed to receive it.

“I’m so sorry...”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

“But this all happened because I fell in love with you, even though I knew... I knew you were already engaged, but I couldn’t help myself.”

Her voice trembled as tears slid down her porcelain cheeks. Tobias reached out and gently wiped them away.

“You did nothing wrong. I’m the one to blame for all this.”

She felt so small and soft as he hugged her to him. All Tobias knew was that he had to protect this woman at all costs. This feeling, this *love*, was as real and true as anything he’d ever known. And yet, underneath it all, there was a small and gloomy voice that wouldn’t keep quiet.

Dahlia, it said. All I wanted was to be more than your father’s apprentice. Just once.

The Rossetti Trading Company

“Miss Dahlia, how did it go?”

As soon as Dahlia returned to the Merchants’ Guild, Ivano hurried over to her, worry written all over his face.

“Mr. Orlando should pay you a visit later today. If you could see to it that he cancels the contract, I’d be very grateful. After that, I’ll re-register the item. I hate to trouble you, but I’d like to hire a scrivener to oversee everything as well.”

“Understood.”

“I’ve also been informed that Orlando & Co. will no longer be doing business with me, so if it’s possible, I’d be grateful if you could put me in touch with another trading company.”

“I’m sorry? Did Mr. Orlando say that?”

Ivano’s mouth hung open in astonishment.

“Yes, I heard it straight from the horse’s mouth. There’s no mistake.”

“I see... Please excuse me, I’ll have to go and consult with the vice-guildmaster. Would you mind waiting a few minutes?”

“Not at all. I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time.”

Dahlia watched Ivano jog up the stairs, then let out a deep sigh. It looked as though she’d be home late once again.

“Oh, hi there, Dahlia!”

Dahlia turned as a familiar voice called out to her. Sure enough, it was Marcello.

“Irma was right, y’know. Red hair does suit you better. I’m just here to make my last delivery for the day.”

“Thanks, she did such a wonderful job. Say, about that order of carriage

covers from the Couriers' Guild; did you put in a word for me?"

"Well, the boss told me we were nearly out of them, so I recommended you."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. I'll make sure I do my best work."

"Thanks, that'd be great. It's a real pain in the backside when things get wet. Are you here for a meeting, then?"

"Yes, I'm looking for a new trading company so I can get the supplies I need. Things have turned a bit difficult with Orlando & Co."

It was technically possible for her to do her procurement as an individual, but the guild placed a limit on the value of transactions in such cases. There was also the issue of trust. Without a trading company to vouch for her, her choice of suppliers would be limited. That was why she was set on finding a new company.

"Just as well; you don't want to be dealing with that idiot."

Dahlia kept it to herself that she'd been dealing with Tobias—whom Marcello refused to even name now—just a little while earlier.

"You oughta set up your own company already. Then you could stock up on whatever you like."

"My own company? I'd never find the guarantors, never mind the deposit."

Dahlia rebuffed the suggestion with a wry smile. There was no law or rule stopping her from starting her own company, but it cost fifteen gold and required four guarantors. To be eligible, a guarantor needed to be an adult. They had to have been president or vice-president of a company registered with the Merchants' Guild for three or more years, or have been working as a member of one of the city's guilds for at least three years. A noble of the rank of viscount or above was also eligible. Each guarantor also had to contribute a minimum of four gold to the venture.

Being a guarantor was a heavy responsibility—if the new company engaged in any illegal activity, even without the guarantors' knowledge, the guarantors would be considered guilty by association and heavily fined. If the company turned a profit, then their initial investment of four gold would be returned

with interest after two years. However, if the company went under within that two-year period, the penalties included the guarantors being liable to settle the company's debts. It wasn't something to be taken on lightly.

"The Rossetti Trading Company has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? I think your friend is right."

Where she'd been listening from, Dahlia had no idea, but Gabriella suddenly appeared in the hallway, a cheerful smile upon her lips. Behind her followed Ivano and Dominic, the scrivener.

"It's a fine opportunity, don't you think?" the woman asked.

"You can count me in as a guarantor!"

"Marcello, what are you talking about?" Dahlia was taken aback. "You need to talk to Irma before deciding on something like that!"

"Irma'd only ask me why I didn't agree to it on the spot. We've got a fair old chunk of savings tucked away, so we can afford it."

"If you'll have me, I'd gladly be a guarantor as well. Oh, I don't think I've introduced myself yet: I'm Mezzena Grieve."

The man with chestnut-colored hair standing beside Marcello was one of those who'd helped to move all of Dahlia's belongings the other day.

"I don't understand. Why would you do that for me?"

"I think it'd be a good investment. The rain used to be such a headache for us at the Couriers' Guild. The waterproof covers and raincoats you invented have been a huge help. If there's a chance you'll be able to create more things like those in the future, it'll make our work a lot easier. I'm more than happy to help make that happen. If I can make a special request—those automatic gates would come in *very* handy."

As Mezzena smiled, Ivano also raised his hand.

"I would also like to put my name forward. Please understand, I don't just say this out of kindness. I also believe it's a fine investment. I trust you'll use the next two years wisely and earn us a good return."

"That makes three," said Dominic, looking cheerful. "I would be only too

delighted to offer my name as well, but my position as a scrivener prohibits me from doing so. I shall speak to my son and grandchildren once I get home. I have one son and three grandchildren working for the guilds; I am sure one of them will be glad to assist you.”

The conversation was moving so fast, Dahlia could barely keep up. There was no way it could be this easy; part of her couldn’t help suspecting they were playing some elaborate prank on her.

“There’s no need for that, Dominic. I can provide the fourth guarantor. My husband will be happy to oblige.”

Gabriella’s husband was a viscount and the guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild, Lord Jedda. Dahlia’s breath caught in her throat.

“Ah, the guildmaster? That’s an excellent idea, Dominic said approvingly. “But wait, I heard that Lord Jedda is visiting the neighboring kingdom on business. Receiving a power of attorney from him would take some time, would it not?”

“No need to worry. I always keep some in my desk.”

The fact that the vice-guildmaster kept a ready supply of powers of attorney from her husband in her desk was questionable on several levels. This same thought seemed to have occurred to everyone, but not one of them dared question Gabriella’s unwavering smile.

“Right then, let’s find a meeting room and get down to business,” the woman said.

“Yes, let’s. I trust you’re happy for me to serve as scrivener, Miss Dahlia?”

“Please, wait! Are all of you really sure about this? This is so sudden, I’m not prepared! Besides, I’m still only a novice toolmaker! I don’t know if I can make those kinds of profits in just two years...”

“Now, what kinda nonsense is that? You proved yourself the day you invented that waterproof cloth. If it’s more research funds you need, we can always add more guarantors. I know I’d find plenty of folks at the Couriers’ Guild who’d be willing to invest in the inventor of that cloth.”

“I’m sure we could find some more guarantors right here,” said Ivano. “I’ll go

and ask around right now if you like.”

“No! Don’t, I beg you.”

Dahlia could barely keep pace with the conversation as it was. Much more and her stomach wouldn’t be able to handle it either.

“The money you pay to the guild will act as your deposit,” Gabriella explained. “If you need more, you’re free to use the money invested by the guarantors as you see fit. We’ll register the Green Tower as your place of work. There are eight documents in all that we’ll need to sort out, but if there’s anything you don’t understand, you can ask me or any of the other staff at the guild anytime. Just say the word, Dahlia, and it shall all be done.”

Gabriella cast Marcello and Ivano an expectant look as she finished.

“Think about it, Dahlia. This could be your chance to get your hands on all those materials you’ve been wanting to try. Y’know, like fire dragon and wind dragon scales, and sea serpent skin!”

“I heard that a griffin was slain in the neighboring kingdom the other day. We may get some materials from that coming in. Goods are flowing in abundance lately; I think we can expect our suppliers to offer more rare items.”

Dahlia knew these materials they were speaking of weren’t easily obtained and cost a pretty penny when they came up for sale.



Even so...a magical toolmaker could dream.

With fire dragon scales, she could create a tool with incredible fire resistance. With wind dragon scales, perhaps she could make something that could fly. She'd heard that sea serpent skin could manipulate the flow of water. She craved to test it out for herself. As for griffins... She'd only ever dreamed of getting her hands on the precious materials from one of those. Even a scrap would do, just enough for her to investigate and discover its properties.

As Dahlia thought of all the other mystical materials she'd never even seen with her own eyes, her craftswoman's heart fluttered.

"To the meeting room, then," said Gabriella with a satisfied smile. "Let's get the ink on that contract."

"Yes... Yes, let's go."

What was a toolmaker to do? In the end, the siren song of those rare and exotic materials proved too strong to resist.



The next day found Dahlia back at the Merchants' Guild once again. The chance to obtain rare and exotic materials she'd only dreamed of until now had been simply too enticing to resist, and she was faced with founding her very own trading company. Tobias hadn't arrived while she was at the guild yesterday, so re-registering the compact magical stove she'd invented had had to wait until today. If Tobias still hadn't come, then the guild might take the matter into its own hands.

A little quicker than usual, Dahlia trotted up the stairs to the guild's second floor. There, she was greeted by Ivano.

"Good morning, Miss Dahlia. I have good news—Mr. Orlando arrived yesterday and we canceled the contract for your stove," he said, wasting no time on small talk. He must have realized the matter had been weighing on her mind.

"Thank you, Ivano; that's a relief."

"I'll bring the documents you'll need for the re-registration. Dominic will be in

this afternoon, so we should be able to complete it today.”

“Perfect. I’ll leave it in your hands.”

The re-registration process was simple and didn’t require much paperwork. Dominic, the scrivener, would only need to confirm that Dahlia’s name was written correctly upon the contract, and then he would draw up a certificate. There was no need for Dahlia to be present. Tobias would keep his reputation as a magical toolmaker intact and not be subject to any penalties. That said, there was no telling what kind of rumors might circulate around the guild.

As Dahlia was checking through the documents, a group of five or six men filed into one of the meeting rooms adjacent to the office. It seemed to be a meeting between some dealers in the textile business. One of them had been held up, so they began to chatter among themselves.

“Y’know what I just heard downstairs? One of the Orlando boys took up with another woman—the day before his wedding!”

The men would never have guessed that the subject of their gossip was sitting in the corner of the office next door, just within earshot. Much as she’d like to have stuck her fingers in her ears, she didn’t want to draw attention to herself. She focused on maintaining an indifferent expression, casually flipping through the pages in her hands.

“One of the Orlandos? Oh, Tobias? The one who does the waterproof cloth? I thought he’d tied the knot already.”

“He was engaged to Carlo’s daughter. Tanya, was it? Well, he was Carlo’s apprentice at the time; not like he could’ve refused.”

“I heard his new girl works the reception desk at his company. I saw her once; sweet little thing.”

“You’ve gotta feel for Tanya, though, eh? Would never have happened if Carlo were still around.”

Rumors certainly had a way of twisting things. *Tobias* made that cloth, did he? And her name was Tanya now? Dahlia suppressed the urge to interject, keeping her thoughts to herself. She was doing her best to maintain her cool, but her fingers were gripping the papers in her hands tighter and tighter.

“Those silly old birds do twitter on, don’t they?”

Dahlia felt a pat on her shoulder, looking up to see Gabriella. The vice-guildmaster wore a lavender dress today, accented with lace. In her ivory-white hair sparkled a silver barrette set with blue stones. As always, she looked strikingly elegant.

“If you aren’t busy, could I borrow you for a little while?”

“Of course,” Dahlia replied, “but don’t you have work?”

“No, it’s my day off. I’m only here because I had nothing else to do; my husband’s away, you see.”

Was the woman just being kind to her? Or did she perhaps want to talk about the new company? Dahlia wasn’t sure, but she quickly assented regardless. As they stepped outside, she saw there was a carriage already there waiting for them.

“Now, Dahlia, what do you say to a few lessons in being a chairwoman?”

“Chairwoman? But...I’m the only person in the company.”

“Precisely. All the more reason to make sure you’re taken seriously. We need to get you looking the part.”

The woman smiled with the look of a cat that had just spied its prey.



The first place Gabriella took Dahlia to was a clothing boutique. It was a shop for commoners, but the garments looked very fine. Clothing and accessories were more costly in this world than in Dahlia’s previous one. Dahlia anxiously tugged on Gabriella’s sleeve.

“Um, I’m not sure I can afford this...”

“Don’t worry. You’ve got my husband as a guarantor; we can always dip into his wallet if need be.”

That reply raised far more questions than it answered, but all were simply met with a blithe smile from Gabriella.

“Welcome! We’ve been expecting you.”

No sooner had the clerk greeted her than Dahlia's dull gray dress was promptly tugged off over her head. Within moments, she was measured here, there, and everywhere. This was immediately followed by a stern scolding from the shop assistant *and* Gabriella about the size of her underwear—completely wrong, apparently. Her weight hadn't changed much since she was in college, so she'd simply kept buying the same sizes without bothering to try things on, she explained—and received an even sterner scolding. The shop assistant got a hold of her and took further measurements before bringing her some new sets of underwear to try on.

“Wearing the correct sizes of lingerie is *absolutely* essential!” the woman reminded her at least three times.

In the end, Dahlia agreed to buy three sets of properly fitting underwear.

Next, she had swatch after swatch of fabric brought up to her face to check which colors suited her skin tone. Those that did were pasted onto a piece of paper and handed to her. It seemed she was supposed to choose from among them. The shop assistant asked her about her taste in clothing.

“I like clothes that are easy to move in, don't show stains, and wash easily,” she replied.

The shop assistant fell silent, while Gabriella put a hand to her forehead in dismay. Dahlia was promptly marched back to the changing room. The shop assistant came in with a heap of clothes in her arms so enormous she could barely see where she was going.

“Try all of these on, please.”

The assistant's smile was ever so slightly chilling. Dahlia didn't know what to say, looking to Gabriella for support, only to see her come through the door with a mountain of clothes twice the size of the last one.

With Gabriella and the shop assistant in charge of selection, Dahlia was dressed up in a seemingly endless succession of outfits until a shortlist of about twenty garments in ten different patterns hung up on the rail. She was told to choose at least three. She tried to get away with picking the three that looked cheapest, but Gabriella immediately saw through her.

“Now, Dahlia, you need to understand what these clothes are for. Think of them as a letter of introduction. When you meet with new business partners and clients as chairwoman of your company, you need to inspire trust. The right clothes are important for creating a good first impression.”

“I could not have said it better myself!” The shop assistant agreed with zeal. “You simply *must* have some more flattering clothes!”

The explanation made sense, Dahlia had to admit. However, she had no idea what sort of clothes would “inspire trust” and “make a good impression.” Frankly, she was too overwhelmed by all these styles to even tell what suited her and what didn’t. She confided this to the other two women and sought their advice. They eventually settled on two outfits. The first was a lustrous lampblack dress with a vanilla-beige jacket. The second included a cool, hyacinth-blue ensemble and a long, deep-blue skirt delicately trimmed with lace. Dahlia was pleasantly surprised by how much she liked them.

“Clothes that are too loose for you end up being difficult to move in. Besides, there are many fabrics with good elasticity coming on the market these days. Fabrics with unicorn hair woven into them are especially comfortable,” explained the shop assistant as Dahlia fretted over the choice of the third outfit.

The craftswoman’s ears immediately pricked up at the mention of unicorn hair. After a bit more deliberation, she picked out a pair of olive-green pants—made, of course, from an elastic fabric woven with unicorn hair. To pair with it, she chose a light summer sweater in lily-white with just a hint of green and a white shirt to wear underneath. As far as Dahlia could remember, this was the first time in her second life that she’d ever bought white clothes.

The final task was to find shoes to match the new outfits. Dahlia insisted on no more than two pairs. Gabriella and the shop assistant dove into deep discussion, and soon the trying-on began. After what felt like eons, they agreed on a beige pair that suited Dahlia’s skin tone and another in glossy black. They both had low heels for comfort and ease of walking.

By the time every garment and shoe had been discussed and finalized, Dahlia felt ready to crumble into a pile of ash. The assistant explained that the shop employed a seamstress specialized in tailoring, so the necessary adjustments

could be made to Dahlia's new clothes right away. While they waited, the assistant prepared the bill. However, it was not Dahlia she presented it to, but Gabriella.

"Dahlia, do you have five gilt silver?" Gabriella asked.

Dahlia understood one gilt silver as equal to about ten thousand yen. They were buying seven pieces of fairly high-quality clothing here, three sets of underwear, and two pairs of shoes—there was no way it cost as little as that.

"I'll pay for these. It must be more expensive than that, right?"

"No, I insist. You save your coin for the next shop, hm?"

The...next shop?

It was a miracle that Dahlia stayed standing.



The next stop turned out to be a cosmetics store. Dahlia had changed into her new lampblack dress and glossy black shoes at the boutique. She hadn't worn heels in years; the extra height was going to take a little getting used to.

"Welcome, Madam Gabriella."

"Good afternoon. I've brought along the special guest I mentioned. This is Dahlia, chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company."

"Madam Dahlia, thank you very much for coming."

Being introduced as chairwoman to the shop assistant caught Dahlia off guard, but she kept from making a fuss, not wanting to embarrass Gabriella. She gathered herself, returning the bright-eyed woman's greeting with what she hoped was a friendly smile.

The store's shelves were lined with all manner of cosmetics, every corner prettily adorned with vibrant flowers. Dahlia couldn't help feeling intimidated.

"What can we help you with today?"

"I'd like you to teach me a beginner's makeup routine that can be done in ten minutes," Dahlia replied. "And I'd like to buy one set of makeup to use for that."

"Certainly, madam."

“I’ll note the steps down for you,” Gabriella added.

The assistant invited Dahlia to sit down in front of a large three-sided mirror. A number of cosmetics sat on a small table to the side. The assistant stood beside Dahlia, while Gabriella reclined on a sofa behind them.

“What kinds of makeup do you normally use?”

“I’ve used face powder and lipstick before, but they never seemed to suit me. That’s all.”

The truth was that she’d stopped using makeup altogether because Tobias had said he didn’t like the smell of it.

“Well, you have very lovely skin already, so we’ll just shape your brows and then apply some simple eyeliner, lipstick, and blush. I’d be happy to recommend some eyeshadow and face powder as well, but we can skip that if you’d prefer.”

In her past life and this one, Dahlia had only ever had the most basic makeup knowledge and skills. She sat there rather awkwardly as the assistant began skillfully shaping her eyebrows, smoothly explaining her actions as she worked. Next, she began picking up the cosmetics on the table, explaining to Dahlia how to use each one before applying it to demonstrate. Dahlia’s slightly thick, ungroomed brows were soon trimmed into a slender, elegant shape. That simple touch was enough to take away any hint of scruffiness the young woman might have had. The peach fuzz on her face was thoroughly shaved, leaving her skin looking noticeably brighter. To her perfectly nice but unremarkable eyes, an application of eyeliner added definition and sharpness, while some eyeshadow lent depth. A little blush added a healthy glow to her pale cheeks. The look was finished off with lipstick.

When Dahlia faced herself in the mirror, she couldn’t help wondering if there wasn’t some touch of magic in this shop’s products. The assistant looked very pleased as she concluded her demonstration. She showed Dahlia to the washbasin in the corner of the shop and helped her remove the makeup—now, it was Dahlia’s turn. She was dismayed; how was she supposed to remember all that?!

Just as she took up the eyeliner pencil, she suddenly remembered something

she'd practiced in high school. One of the tasks she'd been assigned in her magical toolmaking classes involved combining several ingredients to make specific colors, then painting those colors according to instructions onto a certain magical tool. It had been difficult but very enjoyable work. Perhaps she could imagine her face was that magical tool and follow the steps she'd learned in school to put on the makeup. When she thought of it that way, she relaxed a little. After all, magical toolmakers needed a delicate hand—the ability to produce precise coloring and make fine adjustments was essential.

“Oh, brilliantly done! And it suits you so well!” chirped the assistant, delighted, as Dahlia finished applying her makeup. The woman immediately launched into another speech about the different products she'd assembled. Dahlia could only sit and listen politely.

“I recommend a face powder with silk mixed in; it doesn't dry out, you see. Nearly all of our eyeshadows are plant-based, but lately, some manufacturers have been incorporating monster products.”

“Monster products? What sorts of things are they using?”

“Well, for example, there's a pigment extracted from red slimes that has a lovely translucent quality. They've developed a new process that completely detoxifies it. In fact, the lipstick we used today is made with a blend of that new pigment and the classic formula.”

“Oh, red slimes? They're made of gel, so I can see how that would give nice transparency and depth.”

The shop assistant nodded enthusiastically.

“Exactly; the transparency is excellent, and it looks very natural. Just last month, someone developed a lipstick sealer made with the outer skin of krakens. It helps your lipstick last much longer before you need to reapply it.”

“Interesting; kraken skin would certainly form a strong seal. I imagine it must help prevent your lipstick from smearing on cups and glasses too.”

“It does indeed! Very useful when you're out for a meal or having tea,” the assistant replied with the same unwavering energy. “There's another product I've heard about, not that we've ever been able to get it in stock—an

eyeshadow made with ground leaves from the World Tree. It isn't green, they say, but this gorgeous light-blue color, just like the sky itself."

"Its leaves become the color of the sky? Gosh, how lovely."

Whether the conversation that followed was really about makeup or about monster materials, it was hard to tell. Regardless, both of them enjoyed themselves. Gabriella put down her notebook and sat watching the other two women with a gentle expression.

Dahlia eventually left the store with a basic makeup set and a generous armful of free samples.



"I'd like to toast you with a glass of wine, but I'm afraid time is flying, so this'll have to do."

By now it was well past noon, approaching the hour for afternoon tea. Dahlia and Gabriella were seated across from each other in a comfortable café. On the table between them were two plates of thick, fluffy pancakes served with fresh fruit and whipped cream and two dainty cups of black tea.

"I hope you'll consider us friends from now on, Dahlia. Call me Gabriella, won't you? I prefer to speak to company chairs on equal terms."

"R-Right..." Dahlia could only mumble a timid reply.

Gabriella was a viscountess, a guildmaster's wife, and a vice-guildmaster in her own right. Calling her by her first name just didn't seem right.

"Now, Dahlia, we finally got you some nice clothes, and you're slouching. It's a waste, you know."

"Oh, I'll try not to, Vice-Guil— Gabriella."

Dahlia caught herself nearly calling Gabriella by her title, as she was used to. The older woman only laughed and urged Dahlia to eat up her pancakes before they went cold. The pancakes were wonderfully light, each bite melting in her mouth in moments. The flavor was excellent too; they must have been made with top-quality milk and eggs. Dahlia ate the first few bites plain, then added some whipped cream. It was flavored with fragrant vanilla, but not too sweet;

the texture was silky-smooth. She enjoyed her second pancake with the remaining cream and some fruit. The fruits' sweetness and juiciness only enhanced all the other flavors. Both Dahlia and Gabriella were almost silent as they ate; perhaps they'd worked up more of an appetite than they'd realized. When they had finished and were taking a moment to enjoy the sheer satisfaction of those delicious pancakes, they were brought two fresh cups of tea.

"I'm sorry for springing all that on you, Dahlia."

"Oh, please don't apologize. I learned so much today, and you even paid for my clothes. I can't thank you enough. I wouldn't have figured these things out on my own; I'd never even considered them before."

Putting on the new clothes and makeup had been eye-opening. She'd never taken very much interest in fashion and had no idea what sorts of things were important or what suited her. However, she was determined to do whatever was necessary to be a successful chairwoman and earn the trust of her clients. She resolved to put more effort into her appearance from now on.

"Ah, I almost forgot. I think you ought to go to the temple and have your vision restored so you can get rid of those glasses."

"My glasses?"

"Yes, they're only getting in the way."

It was as good as an order. It was certainly true that wearing glasses could be inconvenient at times; just the other day, when she'd been testing her soap dispenser in her bathroom, they'd been fogging up constantly. Having her eyes seen to at the temple would certainly make her work easier. She inquired about the cost—for both eyes, the sum total would be one gold coin and an appropriate donation. She could manage that.

While eye conditions were generally treated by doctors, the temple was where people went to have their vision restored. Doctors treated illness, temples treated wounds—that was the basic rule in this world. Even people who'd lost a limb could have it restored within a week by a priest using regenerative magic. Dahlia remembered the first time she'd heard of that; it had certainly impressed upon her what an incredible force magic was. On the

other hand, the knowledge of how to treat diseases was not as advanced as it had been in Dahlia's previous world. She'd assumed you could treat just about anything with some magical cure, but magic, it turned out, wasn't a panacea. In this world, people feared disease far more than injury.

"Right, I'll pay them a visit. Thank you, Gabriella. You've done so much for me."

"Think nothing of it. I'm only repaying the debt I owed to Carlo."

"You owed my father?" Dahlia asked, puzzled.

She couldn't remember her father doing anything for Gabriella that would have put her in his debt.

"It was your father who introduced me to my husband. He and I both owe Carlo a debt of gratitude."

"I had no idea."

"Carlo forbade me from speaking about it. He said he didn't want everyone coming to him looking for introductions to rich husbands, so I was to keep quiet about it until he died."

Gabriella's husband was a nobleman, Viscount Jedda. Dahlia's father had been an honorary baron. It wasn't far-fetched that they'd crossed paths somewhere or other.

"There was another reason. He asked me to be there for you should you ever need help, as a toolmaker or just as a woman. And if you didn't, then I was to keep this a secret forever."

"He really said that?"

"Not that I thought you were struggling. I just thought, since you didn't have that Orlando boy holding you back anymore, it'd be good timing to start your own company. Of course, being chairwoman means you need to be the face of your company—that's what today was all about. As for why I insisted on making my husband a guarantor, well, having a nobleman's backing will keep you out of most kinds of trouble."

"Thank you so much..."

“I told you—just repaying a debt. There’s no need to thank me. And remember, Dahlia, you’re free now. There’ll be a lot more work and a lot more men coming your way from here on out, but you can do things on *your* terms now. It’s up to you to judge what you want and need, and to forge your own path.”

“I understand.” Dahlia nodded, her expression resolute.

“He kept it quiet, but all sorts of people came to your father for advice, you know. He was well-liked and very much trusted.”

This was a side of her father Dahlia had never known. He’d often come home late, and she’d always assumed he’d just been out drinking. In reality, he might have been helping someone with their troubles.

“Do you know what Carlo’s favorite pastime was, Dahlia?”

“Well, if not toolmaking, then...drinking, I suppose?”

“He did love his drink, I’ll grant you that. But no, his *favorite* pastime was definitely...” The ivory-haired woman leaned in toward Dahlia with a deadly serious expression. “...making debtors out of people and then swearing them to silence.”

Both women burst into laughter and began fondly reminiscing about Carlo, Dahlia’s dearly missed father.

Re-u-Knighted

The sky truly was intensely, beautifully blue. Dahlia felt a wonderful sense of freedom as she looked around the familiar streets with her newly crystal-clear vision, no longer reliant on her glasses. She could even better appreciate the subtle beauty of her outfit—the olive-green pants and lily-white sweater Gabriella had bought her.

Dahlia cast her mind back to earlier in the day. She had hopped on an omnibus first thing this morning and traveled to the temple, where she would have her vision restored and see if she could then do without her glasses.

The temple was in the northeast of the capital, close to the castle. It was a beautiful building made of white, crystalline stone that glittered in the sunlight. The architecture was something like a cross between a church and the Roman forum. Medical treatment didn't take place in the temple proper, but in an adjacent building known as the Hall of Healing. Within the white, rectangular building reminiscent of a hospital, you were guided to different wings depending on the nature and severity of your injury or illness.

Regarding her donation, as the fee to restore her vision in both eyes would come to one gold, she was told a few silver coins would be appropriate. She felt very nervous, but the guide in the Hall of Healing warmly assured her that restoring her vision would be a simple procedure. She had a long wait of two and a half hours, but when the priest at last saw her, the whole procedure was completed within five minutes. She'd left the temple with her vision as clear and sharp as it had been when she was a child.

Rather than boarding the omnibus again, Dahlia walked into the city center, enjoying the scenery as she went. To celebrate the founding of her company, she'd decided to treat herself to a nice meal. The peace of her unremarkable life had been shattered over the past few days—first she'd lost her fiancé, then she'd stumbled across a blood-soaked knight, and finally she'd been practically bribed into founding her own company. Thus, she was determined that the rest

of today would be pleasantly uneventful. She would enjoy a delicious meal, pick up an interesting new book on toolmaking and some sweet red wine, then head home. She'd take a long bath and spend the rest of the evening relaxing with her book. Tomorrow morning, she'd be ready to plunge back into her toolmaking with all cylinders firing. Something like that, anyway.

She wasn't quite sure where to eat, but then she noticed a chic-looking restaurant on the main street that she remembered Gabriella mentioning yesterday. It was her first time entering a restaurant like this, so she felt a little nervous, but she gathered her courage and stepped over the threshold. A staff member greeted her cheerfully and showed her to a table out on the terrace. Each of the tables outside was shaded by a large beige parasol. Beneath it, out of the afternoon sun's glare, the fresh, early summer breeze felt very pleasant.

Dahlia was handed a menu and was merrily perusing it when she noticed something peculiar. At a table a few meters away from hers, the diners were staring at something out on the street as if transfixed. One after another, people looked up from their plates and menus, every one of them gazing in the same direction. Wondering what was going on, Dahlia followed the stares, when suddenly her eyes met with a young man walking toward her.

"Oh!"

What were the chances? Not expecting him to recognize her, Dahlia averted her gaze so as not to appear rude. However, the dark-haired young man made a beeline for her. He looked just as strikingly beautiful as she remembered. The white silk taffeta shirt and black pants he wore today suited him well.

"I apologize for disturbing you, but might you be related to someone called Dali? Or...is that you?"

"Yes...it is."

It was Volf, the knight she'd met in the forest. His golden eyes shone happily as he looked down at her.

"It really is you! I'm so glad. My vision was so fuzzy the other day, so I wasn't sure."

"Please forgive me. The forest isn't safe for a woman on her own; that's why I

was dressed that way.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I took full advantage of your goodwill, after all. I can’t thank you enough for what you did for me that day.”

Volf didn’t seem at all angry at her for hiding her gender. He even politely bowed as he thanked her.

“Did you know? Back in the forest, I mean.”

“I wasn’t sure. Your voice sounded just like a man’s, but while we were riding in the carriage, I noticed you had more of a woman’s scent.”

A woman’s scent? She had a mind to ask if that strengthening spell he used enhanced his sense of smell too, but she kept the question to herself for now.

“I was using a magical device to change my voice. I’m surprised you were able to recognize me.”

“It was the way you looked away when you saw me; it struck me as odd. There’s the color of your eyes too. I couldn’t see well the other day, but I remember that jade-green color. And you just had the same presence, so...I came over in the hope that it might just be you. Then I caught your scent, and I was almost sure.”

“You’ve...certainly got a good nose.”

She wasn’t wearing perfume and she bathed every day; how much scent could she have? Now she was feeling awfully self-conscious.

“I’m actually sort of relieved that you’re a woman.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, to be honest, I found you rather charming when we met the other day. I started wondering if my tastes had started leaning the other way.”

“What way?!” Dahlia exclaimed, making Volf chuckle.

“I’m more than happy to stand and chat, but would you mind if I joined you? Of course, if you’re meeting someone special here, we can do this another day.”

The gazes of all the women in the vicinity weren’t merely pricking at her; they were stabbing. It could be a pain if anyone got the idea that they were

acquaintances, but with half the town looking at them already, perhaps it was too late for that. Dahlia gave up worrying and nodded.

“By all means, take a seat. I’m here alone.”

“Thanks. This is incredible luck. I was just on my way to the Merchants’ Guild.”

“Going shopping for the knights?”

“No, looking for you.”

“Me?”

“I was going to ask if they knew anyone who fit your description. I wanted to thank you for what you did. I didn’t feel right not compensating you for that potion, and I wanted to return the coat you lent me too. I had the captain write me a letter of introduction.”

That was a close call. She’d have been in for a stern warning about going into the forest alone and perhaps asked why she’d used a false name. Every woman in the guild would have wanted to pin her down and ask her about Volf too.

“Let me treat you to lunch, won’t you? And I’ll pay for that potion.”

“Um, well...”

“Ah, don’t worry, I’m not trying to hit on you. We made a promise, remember? That if I saw you, I’d at least buy you a drink. I just want to thank you properly and, if you don’t mind, I’d love to continue our talk about magical swords and tools.”

“Well, all right. That would be lovely, thank you.”

“Great!”

Perhaps it shouldn’t have been surprising for a knight to have such a strong sense of duty. Content to put his behavior down to that, Dahlia ordered the seafood spaghetti and chilled tomato soup. Volf selected herb-crusted grilled chicken, a ham and cheese platter, Vichyssoise soup, and two glasses of a reasonably expensive white wine.

“Are you happy with white? If not, I’ll order some red as well.”

“Yes, I like white too.”

Dahlia had always felt thankful for the rich food culture here in the royal capital. She'd heard that it was known in other kingdoms as the "City of Cuisine." It seemed that many of this world's most delicious foods could be found here. The staple grain here was wheat, and the cuisine resembled what Dahlia would have called Western-style in her previous world. There was nothing exactly like the Japanese food she remembered, but some dishes came close. Naturally, since ingredients like monster meats could be found in the markets here, there were many dishes the likes of which Dahlia had never seen in her former life.

Ever since she was little, she had looked forward to the two times in the month when she and her father would go out to eat. They always tried something new, and if it turned out disappointing, they simply made something good at home. Now that she thought about it, she'd rather lost interest in eating out since her father had passed away. She hadn't gone looking for a new restaurant in a long, long time. Perhaps today would be a good opportunity to break that pattern. No one was holding her back anymore—she would hunt for some new restaurants and enjoy as much delicious food and fine drink as she wished.

"I didn't realize how beautiful you were when we met in the forest."

"Thank you for the opening compliment. That was my natural look, though. I'm wearing makeup today."

Her father having been a baron, Dahlia was familiar with this custom among the nobility. When meeting a woman for the first time, young noblemen would typically pay her a compliment before beginning serious conversation. Another thing she remembered was that socializing with nobles very frequently gave her father a stomachache, to the point that he often took medicine.

"Are you actually a noblewoman, Miss Dali?"

"No, I'm a commoner. But my father was an honorary baron, so I'm familiar with the etiquette. It must be difficult coming up with compliments for women you barely know."

"It can be. People get rather upset if you forget or if you don't do it well," Volf replied somewhat gloomily.

Dahlia could easily picture the scene. Volf was the very definition of an Adonis. He must have gotten caught up in dozens of misunderstandings. Just as Dahlia was about to steer the conversation in a different direction, their white wine arrived along with the ham and cheese platter.

“Let’s have a toast. Then we *must* try some of these cheeses.”

Volf poured two glasses of the white wine for them. It had the palest glimmer of gold.

“Well then, here’s to our reunion.”

“To our reunion.”

They touched their glasses together with a gentle clink. Dahlia remembered that in her previous world, you weren’t supposed to clink glasses when toasting with wine, but here, people always did. It was believed to banish evil or some such. The rule applied whether it was wine, ale, or any drink, really. People drinking alone would simply touch their glass to a bottle instead. Dahlia had seriously wondered at first whether it wasn’t just a ploy by the glassmakers to increase their sales, but it seemed people followed this custom even when using wooden cups or, in the case of nobility, silver goblets.

“How do you like it?”

“It’s very good.”

The wine was on the dry side, but not at all bitter, with a pleasantly grapey flavor. Dahlia liked it very much.

“I’m glad. Back in the forest, I got the impression you might prefer red.”

“Red’s my usual choice. I like sweet wine.”

“Let’s order a sweet red next, then.”

It was the middle of the day and they’d only just opened their first bottle; now he was talking about a second? *That’s a bit hasty, isn’t it?* That said, she’d already helped herself to a few mouthfuls of the cool, refreshing wine. It *was* very pleasant. The main dishes soon arrived, and the pair continued conversing as they ate.

“Are your eyes better now?”

“Completely; I can see perfectly now. I’m taking it easy for a few days just in case, though.”

“Are they making you write that apology letter?”

“No, no. It’s a proper rest. The captain let me off without a letter or anything.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I had the order searching high and low for me for two days, though, so I’ll need to buy everyone a few drinks when I get back on duty.”

“Are you sure we can’t split the bill today?”

“Not a chance. Don’t worry, they pay us Beast Hunters pretty well.”

As she listened, Dahlia popped a forkful of her seafood spaghetti into her mouth. The chopped seafood was well seasoned with salt and spices. It was an ideal dish for a hot summer’s day. The royal capital was located quite close to the ocean, so it enjoyed a steady supply of fresh seafood. However, while the varieties mostly resembled those Dahlia had known in her previous world, one major difference was in the sizes. It wasn’t uncommon for fishermen to pull up two-meter-long squid, fist-sized shrimps, and thirty-centimeter scallops. You had to make sure you knew what you were ordering.

Her tomato soup was a little sweeter than she’d expected. However, the seasoning of basil made it taste very fresh and pleasant. This was another dish well suited for the summer months.

Volf neatly sliced his herb-crusted chicken, taking sips of wine between bites. Judging from his satisfied expression, it must have been good.

“Help yourself to the cheese too,” said Volf, gesturing toward the platter.

“Thank you.”

As she looked down at the assortment, Dahlia noticed two kinds of cheeses that were curiously red in color. They were red even where they’d been sliced, so it wasn’t some kind of coating.

“I’ve never seen this red cheese before.”

“That one must be crimson cattle cheese.”

“Crimson cattle?”

“Yeah. They’re a species of monster, actually, but they’ve been domesticated in one of the neighboring kingdoms. Their coats are all red and white patches, and even their milk is pink. I heard their products are getting very popular lately.”

“I’ll try a little.”

As she bit in, she found it was harder than she’d expected. The flavor was like Mimolette, only sweeter and richer. *This cheese would be a better match with red wine than white*, she thought.

“If we’re ordering another wine, we’d better make it red for this cheese, huh?”

It seemed Volf had had exactly the same thought. Dahlia couldn’t help smiling.

“By the way,” he began, changing tack. “Your father wasn’t angry about you lending me his coat, was he?”

“No, don’t worry. My father passed away a while ago.”

“I’m so sorry. I never would have taken it if I’d known it was a keepsake.”

“It’s all right. I often wear it myself to keep the rain off. It would be a waste to just keep it hung up somewhere.”

“I’ll take it to a cleaner before I bring it back to you. Um, I didn’t realize the inside was lined with wyvern, not sand lizard skin.”

“I can take care of the cleaning at home, so you don’t need to worry about that. And the wyvern skin was just some scraps I stuck together and attached. My father was always getting his coat hooked on things and tearing it, so I put that skin in there just to reinforce it.”

“You used wyvern skin for that?”

Volf looked at her with his mouth slightly open in shock. The wyvern skin Dahlia had used was only offcuts that would have been thrown away otherwise.

She'd cut it up into strips, mixed it through with a little blue slime powder, and used a mixture of adhesive and magic to attach it to the coat with a fixing spell. Using a single large piece of wyvern skin would have been far too expensive.

"Yes, but it was only some odd pieces that were going to be thrown away anyway. It didn't all stick very well either; the bits I used from the back of the elbow are all falling off."

"Do you happen to be in the clothing business, Miss Dali? Or wholesale, maybe?"

"Oh, excuse me, I still haven't properly introduced myself. My name's Dahlia Rossetti. I'm a novice magical toolmaker."

"A magical toolmaker? Well, that explains why you know so much about them. And there I was talking about that waterproof cloth like I was some kind of expert... That's embarrassing."

The young man hid half his face in his palm. It was frankly impressive how he managed to look like a work of art no matter how he posed.

"It was good to hear from someone who actually uses that cloth. I'm the one who invented it, you see."

"Really? *You* made that?"

"I did. The feedback you gave me was very useful; I'm going to try developing a new version that's lighter and more breathable."

"That'd be brilliant! Making camp would be so much easier... Gods above, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for letting me meet Dahlia Rossetti once again."

"Stop that!" Dahlia exclaimed as Volf closed his eyes and solemnly put his hands together in prayer.

That was the second time she'd shouted at him today. The man in front of her grinned like a child who'd pulled off a bit of mischief. His appearance and his behavior were totally at odds with each other. She wasn't sure what happened when she was with him; was she thrown off her stride or pulled into his? Perhaps the wine was just getting to her more than she realized.

“Bottle’s almost empty; I’ll order us another,” said Volf.

However, the restaurant had become more crowded since they’d arrived, and few of the waitstaff were coming near the terrace.

“Better go find someone inside.”

Before Dahlia could offer to go herself, Volf had already stood up. Was it the strict hierarchy within the knights that he was used to? Or was it entertaining women? She decided not to think too deeply about that one. She had delicious food, fine wine, and as engaging a conversation partner as she could ask for. The gentle breeze that wafted across the terrace felt ever so lovely.



“Dahlia?”

Unfortunately, Dahlia knew that voice. It belonged to the last man in the universe whom she wanted to meet, especially when she’d been in such a good mood. She peeked around to see him gaping at her in astonishment. Hoping to pretend she hadn’t noticed him, she quickly looked away again.

“Miss Dahlia!”

This voice belonged to someone else—a young woman, in fact—who came hurrying over in a way that reminded Dahlia of a little animal. With her wispy, pale, honey-colored locks, her doe eyes, and her small, slight stature, she was the kind of woman men felt compelled to protect. Her cherubic features, lightly accented with makeup, were already drawing the gaze of many of the restaurant’s patrons.

“I’m so sorry! I never meant to hurt you... I’ve been wanting to apologize to you this whole time...”

“Emilia, you’ve done nothing wrong! I’m the one to blame.”

In an instant, the whole restaurant was looking at them. Dahlia’s emotional discomfort index shot through the roof.

Could they not have simply ignored her and gone on their merry way? Was it really necessary to do this *here*? Now?

Dahlia looked at the tearful young woman in front of her and felt completely

and utterly unmoved. She had no interest in what she had to say.

“Your engagement was ruined because of me... I’m so, so sorry!”

“I’ve nothing more to say.”

Emilia may have been apologizing, but there was something suspect about these theatrics. Why was she advertising their affairs for all these strangers to hear? Was she trying to open up Dahlia’s wounds and provoke her? It was hard to think otherwise.

“I’m sorry... Please, please forgive me...”

“Dahlia, don’t blame Emilia for this.”

All Dahlia had said was “I’ve nothing more to say.” Five words, that was all. She would love for him to tell her where exactly in that little sentence she had blamed Emilia. He could go and find himself some manuscript paper like they’d used in school and write her an extended essay, analyzing the matter in scientific detail if he liked.

It was bad enough having her own time wasted by these two, but she really wanted to avoid involving Volf. As she was wearily trying to figure out the quickest escape from this situation, she realized that the knight had returned. The stares of the curious onlookers, as well as those of Tobias and Emilia, had found a new target. It was no wonder. Volf didn’t merely steal glances wherever he went—his beauty took people’s breath away too. From behind, he whispered so that only Dahlia would hear.

“Do you still love him?”

“Not one bit,” she replied instantly, in as few words as necessary.

“My dear Miss Dahlia... If you have broken off your engagement, then I shall take that to mean you are single.”

Volf stood at Dahlia’s side and spoke in a tone she’d never heard from him before. His smile was like something from a charming painting, and all of a sudden his manner had become that of a fairy-tale prince from a play—a cheesy play at that.

“Praise be to the goddess of fortune! Many times have I entreated you to dine

with me, yet, to my sorrow, not once have I had the pleasure. Now, on the day that we are reunited, I find you are free from your attachment. I am overjoyed!"

The peculiar speech was delivered in a voice as saccharine as sugary candies drowned in honey. Dahlia's face tightened, a horrible chill running up her spine.

"Dahlia, who's this?" Tobias asked with a frown.

Tobias had no right to be talking to Dahlia so casually and no right to demand the other man's name in front of all these people. However, Volf answered before Dahlia could.



“I am Volfred Scalfarotto of the royal knights. To whom am I speaking?”

Dahlia’s breath caught in her throat. The other day, Volf had said he was the son of a minor noble—*minor*! There wasn’t a single person in this city who didn’t know the noble house of Scalfarotto. Twenty years ago, it was that family alone who had made possible the king’s Great Water Reform, having cracked the secret to the mass production of water crystals. For his achievement, Viscount Scalfarotto—as he had been at the time—had been made an earl. It had been such a historic feat that it had even been written about in the textbooks Dahlia had used in elementary school. Today, the Scalfarottos were responsible for nearly all aspects of the kingdom’s water infrastructure, from the steady supply of water crystals to purification in the sewer system. They were supremely gifted in water magic, more than anyone else in the capital, and it was rumored that the next Earl Scalfarotto would be made a marquis.

Both Tobias and Emilia froze on the spot.

“P-Please forgive my manners! I am Tobias Orlando of Orlando & Co.”

“And I-I am Emilia Tallini, a receptionist at Orlando & Co.”

“Is that so?”

That curt response was all Volf gave the pair before he turned away, not even deigning to look at them. Instead, he walked to Dahlia and elegantly offered his hand.

“Miss Dahlia, shall we have a change of scenery? I have just the place in mind, and there is so much I wish to discuss with you. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me?”

They were only about two-thirds of the way through their meal, but Dahlia was glad of the invitation to escape from this ridiculous soap opera. She didn’t hesitate to lay her hand upon that of the beautifully poised knight.

“Gladly.”

Volf’s hand felt very warm around hers.



Once they’d walked a little ways from the restaurant, Dahlia said, “You saved

me back there. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I just hope what I said won’t cause any problems with your work or anything. If so, I can—”

“Of course not! It just took me by surprise. I didn’t know you had such a silver tongue.”

“It was all true, though. I invited you for a drink when you left me at the castle gates, but you brushed me off. I said I wanted to talk with you again too.”

When the other carriage had come up behind Dahlia, Volf had said something she hadn’t heard. She felt a rush of happiness knowing he’d been thinking the same as her at that moment.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you over the rain. I should apologize for deceiving you and letting you think I was a man as well.”

“You don’t need to feel guilty about that. If I’d realized you were a woman, I’d never have gone and washed in the river, so my eyes would have gotten even worse. I wouldn’t have eaten all your food and drunk your wine either.”

Volf stopped in his tracks and looked at Dahlia with concern.

“I’m...not imposing on you, am I? Did you want to be alone today?”

“Not at all. It was just lunch; nothing special. Look, about the engagement—it was something our fathers arranged. Just before we were about to get married, my fiancé told me he’d found his ‘true love.’ That’s why we broke things off.”

“True love...?” Volf was unable to hide the disdain in his voice. “Can’t say I really understand.”

“Me neither,” Dahlia agreed with a brief shake of her head.

In this world, it wasn’t generally approved of for people to make decisions on the basis of “true love.”

“No wonder you don’t have feelings for him anymore.”

“None whatsoever.”

“At least it happened before you registered your marriage. That’s the only silver lining.”

Dahlia nodded with a genuine smile. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“To be honest, I feel like we were rudely interrupted back there. I’d love to talk with you a while longer, and I could do with another drink. If it’s all right with you, shall we go somewhere else?”

She didn’t know this man well, and he was a nobleman. Even though she was no longer engaged, her immediate thought was to turn him down. Just as she cast her eyes down at the ground, she suddenly remembered how badly she’d wanted to speak to him again after they’d first parted ways. The thought gave her a much-needed push, and she straightened herself, answering confidently.

“Definitely. I’d like something else to eat.”

As the pair set off again, they suddenly realized they were still holding hands and quickly let go.



Dahlia and Volf walked for a while, heading into the southern part of the Central District. On Volf’s recommendation, they entered an eatery for commoners that offered a broad range of drinks. Once they were inside the red-roofed building, Volf asked a staff member to show them to the private room farthest in the back.

“Now, let’s get ourselves a proper meal. What’ll you have to drink? They’ve got a good selection of red wines; I’ll get you anything you like. Well, I’d prefer you didn’t order a cask, though.”

The menu Dahlia was given was very thick indeed—more surprisingly, half of it was made up of various kinds of alcohol.

“A cask of wine, you said? Oh, there it is.”

Right at the back of the menu, Dahlia saw they offered casks of wine in three varieties—red, white, and rosé.

“I suppose they must be for parties,” she mused.

In this world, commoners didn’t put on fancy clothes and hold a ceremony when they got married. Instead, it was customary to take a short holiday after registering your marriage, during which you’d get together with friends and

family, either at your house or a restaurant, and enjoy a good night of eating and drinking together. Of course, Dahlia had yet to experience that herself.

“I’ll have a pale ale then, please.”

“Right, then I’ll have a dark ale. How about food? Shall we order a few things to share?”

“Sounds good. That way, we can try a bit of everything.”

A waiter soon came to take their order, and they pointed out their choices on the menu.

“We’ll have one pale ale and one dark ale, two orders of seafood skewers, the pork and vegetable fritters, and the steamed chicken. Miss Dahlia?”

“I’d like the black pepper fries and grilled fava beans, please.”

As the waiter left, Volf readjusted himself in his seat.

“Would you mind if I use this? It’s an anti-eavesdropping device.”

From his pocket, he took out a small silver object shaped like a pyramid. These devices were a kind of magical tool often used by nobles and wealthy merchants.

“Feel free. I don’t think we’ll be sharing any secrets, though.”

“I don’t really use it for that—just when I want to chat freely with my friends from the order.”

The little silver pyramid began to glow pale blue in Volf’s hand.

“Before we get started, I want to make a request. In the *very* slim chance that I end up getting smashed, will you call me a carriage to take me back to the castle barracks?”

“I will. And if the same should happen to me, please put me on a carriage to the Green Tower in the West District.”

While there was no good reason to assume either of them would be getting blackout drunk today, it was better to be safe than sorry—the two of them weren’t close, after all. It would be no good calling a carriage if they didn’t know where to send each other. There was a taxi-like system of carriages that waited

around the city's busy shopping districts; it was the safest way to get home after a few too many.

"I've never blacked out from drinking before, though," Volf commented. "How about you?"

"Not even once. I've never gotten very drunk at all."

"What's the most you've ever drunk?"

"I got through four bottles of red wine once and could still do my work perfectly."

"Huh, I think that more than qualifies you as a kingsnake."

In this world, "kingsnake" was code for someone who could hold a good deal of liquor. Kingsnakes were a species of monster which lived in the deserts; they could be lured out of hiding with alcohol and seemed to have a strong liking for it. Dahlia had heard that hunters would fill a large jar with drink, wait until the kingsnake had consumed it all and was completely drunk, then capture it.

"I've never really had much more than that. How about you?" Dahlia inquired.

"I've drunk white wine up to the carryover and been just fine."

"Wow... That makes you a sea serpent."

The "carryover" meant ten or more bottles, while "sea serpent" referred to someone a rank above a kingsnake. These people truly had livers of iron and basically never got drunk. Whether it was from physiological differences or the influence of magic, Dahlia wasn't sure, but there were many people in this world upon whom alcohol had little effect. Dahlia herself could drink far more here than she could in her previous life, though by this world's standards, she wasn't particularly resilient against it.

"There's a lot of us sea serpents in the knights."

"Treating them to drinks is going to cost you. Let's split the bill here, shall we?"

"Looks like I said too much. Pretend you never heard that. Maybe if you order that cask, we can split it."

It seemed there would be no changing his mind; he was determined to treat her today. Dahlia realized she had better just be gracious and accept.

“Very well. Another toast, then,” she said, relenting. “Here’s to our reunion.”

“To our reunion!”

Their food and drinks had begun to arrive, and they toasted with their ale. Dahlia’s ice-cold pale ale was light in flavor. Nevertheless, it had a good, hoppy aroma and a pleasantly subtle bitterness, and it left a fresh, clean aftertaste. It wasn’t overly carbonated either, which she felt suited this ale’s flavor well.

Volf, on the other hand, had already emptied his first mug of dark ale, and what was left in the bottle wasn’t likely to last long.

“Now, d’you think we can relax and talk as equals? We won’t be heard if I use the anti-eavesdropper.”

“I’m not so sure... I mean, you *are* the son of an earl.”

“I may bear the Scalfarotto name, but I’m the youngest child. I don’t have any guards or anyone following me; they just leave me to it. My mother was no one of note, and the earl’s third wife at that. I was brought up in a separate house, and now I live in barracks. So you see, I’m no good with formality. Sure you can’t indulge me?”

There was the slightest hint of a tear in the man’s golden eyes. He looked as beautiful as ever, so why was Dahlia suddenly remembering a dog she’d kept in her previous life?

“All right, then. I’m a commoner, so I don’t know the nobility’s customs anyway. I’ll try not to be too formal with you. Now, that anti-eavesdropping device—how does it work?”

“According to one of the mages at the castle, it layers the sounds nearby so they cancel one another out. It doesn’t muffle every word, but the way it makes the sound randomly fade in and out means it’s impossible to follow what’s being said if you’re at all far away. You can’t get away with using it if the tables are too close together, though; it sounds unnatural.”

“I see. It can’t do anything to stop lipreading either, then.”

Rather than completely insulating the users in some invisible soundproof barrier, it seemed the device simply made conversations difficult to pick up.

“Wait, do you make things like this too?”

“Well, I’m not sure what ‘things like this’ would mean exactly. I make magical tools useful for daily life and sell them through the Merchants’ Guild. Dryers, waterproof cloth, those sorts of things. I think these anti-eavesdropping devices are more mages’ territory than magical toolmakers’.”

“Right, I see. I thought magical toolmakers made pretty much all of these things.”

They each took half of the dish of freshly grilled fava beans, snacking on them as they drank their ale. The beans were piping hot and a little fiddly to shell, but they were delightfully aromatic and cooked to the perfect softness, with a subtly sweet aftertaste. These beans, slightly charred on the outside and seasoned with a generous sprinkle of salt, were very much like those Dahlia had enjoyed in her previous life.

“I have to say, Sir Volf, you surprised me back there. It was like you became a completely different person.”

“I just thought it’d be a good way to cut the conversation short. That’s what I’m like when I actually try to act like a noble. Would you prefer I spoke that way?”

“Absolutely not. It made me want to head for the hills.”

“Good. It’d be exhausting having to keep that up. I just wish I had more ordinary looks to match my personality.”

It was just as well they couldn’t be heard; that comment seemed likely to bring down the wrath of every average-looking man in the kingdom. That said, it was true enough that beauty brought its own problems. Dahlia remembered an especially pretty friend she’d had in college who had often been bothered on account of their looks.

“I imagine you must get accosted quite often.”

“Three times today already, just in the time it took me to get from the

barracks to that restaurant.”

“It must be tiring just to go outside.”

“If I’m on my own, I usually wear a hood and glasses. I made a point of standing out today, though, just in case...you might find me.”

“I’m sorry I’ve put you through so much trouble. I should have at least told you my name so you could find me through the Merchants’ Guild.”

“No, *I’m* sorry for being so pathetic. I don’t blame you at all. I just really wanted to speak to you again.” Volf reached up with one hand and scratched his head, looking bashful. “Anyway, enough about that. Let’s eat!”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to this.”

Volf handed Dahlia her portion of the seafood skewers, and she began to eat them one by one. They included large shrimps, small fish, scallops, and kraken. All were simply seasoned with salt. The plump, meaty shrimps were tender and juicy, and with each one being the size of Dahlia’s fist, they were very satisfying. The little fish, cooked whole, were somewhat similar to shishamo smelt but were bright red in color. The white flesh was sweet, the innards subtly bitter. There was something odd about the flavor that she couldn’t quite pin down. She wondered if these fish were a monster species. The scallops were large, and the grilling hadn’t at all diminished their delicious sweetness and tender texture.

The kraken was definitely the most unusual item. These marine monsters were regularly caught by fishermen and mercenaries using large boats, so they were available cheaply and in large quantities both as a source of food and raw materials. What was on Dahlia’s plate had been sliced up into bite-sized pieces and represented only a tiny piece of the animal, but the reddish-brown color on the surface reminded Dahlia of octopus. When she bit into it, however, she found the springy texture and aroma were just like squid. She’d heard that kraken could have a bit of an unpleasant smell, but Dahlia didn’t notice anything untoward—it had obviously been taken care of at some stage in the preparation or cooking.

“Have you ever found yourself wondering whether kraken is more like octopus or squid?” Dahlia asked.

“Yeah, it looks like octopus all right, but the flavor’s definitely closer to squid. Hard to tell when you see it on the plate like this, but when you think about how many portions you’d get out of a single kraken, it’s amazing, right?”

“Right. The ice mages must certainly have their work cut out around this time of year.”

Just one kraken could easily fill several storehouses, depending on the size. They were butchered into large sections out at sea but needed to be cut even smaller to be sold in the markets. Aside from midwinter, ice mages were kept busy all year round filling the storehouses with ice. Once frozen, the krakens were cut up into small, sellable pieces. Dahlia recalled many of the mages gifted in ice magic doing this as a fairly lucrative part-time job when she was in high school.

Next, Dahlia and Volf moved onto the fritters and black pepper fries, and they ordered more ale. This time, they both went for the ruby ale.

“It really is ruby red.”

“Yeah, they brew it with red barley.”

Dahlia found herself turning her glass around to admire the beautiful, deep color. She tried a sip, finding it very fruity and strongly carbonated. This would be ideal for enjoying with fried food. The ale and the chunky fries, seasoned with salt and black pepper, made for an absolutely irresistible combination. She’d have to start loosening her belt at this rate.

“So, do magical tools usually have just one enchantment on them?”

“That’s right. One enchantment per object is standard. Layering enchantments is usually the work of skilled mages and alchemists.”

“And how would a mage go about layering enchantments? Have you heard about that before?”

Volf took a knife and split the steamed chicken on the table into two equal halves. The innards had been removed, but it still made for quite a hearty dish.

“Well, I’m sure everyone has their own secrets, but I imagine they must use some technique to ‘seal in’ each enchantment. Whether that would be a special

kind of spell or potion, I'm not sure."

"I see. Sounds quite complicated. I remember you told me about those enchanted kitchen knives before, and I was thinking it'd be really useful if we could have some different enchantments on our swords, like the reinforcing and self-cleaning ones. Oh, and a weight-reducing one too."

"Hm?"

Dahlia paused, staring down at the knife Volf had just used to slice the steamed chicken. With a hand to her forehead, she sat there thinking about the structure of a sword for a few moments.

"Do the swords you use have changeable guards and scabbards?"

"Yeah, we change them when we need to. Blades break now and then."

"I was just thinking—if they're changeable, then surely they all qualify as separate objects. I don't know whether it'd be possible or not; it might have been tried already, but...if you disassembled one, enchanted the blade with a reinforcing spell, used water and air magic to put a self-cleaning spell on the guard, enchanted the scabbard with a weight-reducing spell, and then put it all together... I wonder whether that would work."

"Wow..." Volf's golden eyes went wide, and then he beamed. "That'd be fantastic! It'd make our work a whole lot easier. You could create the first totally man-made magical sword!"

Volf couldn't disguise his excitement with that last comment, almost shouting it. He looked a little sheepish and quickly lowered his voice again. When Volf spoke about magical swords, there were moments when his expression became like a child's. His eyes sparkled with curiosity and a spirit of adventure; they were fascinating to look at.

"Sorry, I went and got overexcited there..."

"I can see you've got a real passion for these swords."

"Yeah, it's my dream to wield a magical sword or some other enchanted weapon. I can't do enchantments myself, but it's a lot of fun just thinking about it."

“I know the feeling. I love my magical tools, and coming up with new designs is one of my favorite parts.”

Dahlia realized this might be the one thing she and this young man had in common. She guessed he’d realized it too—his golden eyes were brimming with happiness.

“Do you have anywhere to be today?”

“No, no plans.”

“Great. I’m in the mood for a few more drinks.” Volf emptied his glass in one swig. “But first, let’s finish off this chicken.”

The two of them did just that, tucking into the steamed chicken as they continued their conversation. It had cooled by now, but the meat was beautifully moist and tender; it just fell apart in the mouth. It had no strong odor and was delicious on its own and with the spiced onion sauce.

“Time for another drink. I think I’ll have an akvavit with ice; how about you?”

“Akvavit? What’s that like?”

“It’s a spirit made from potatoes. It tastes slightly of caraway and some other herbs. Goes down smoothly.”

“Hmm, okay. One for me too then, please.”

Volf got up and ordered, and a waiter soon arrived with bottles, glasses, and a small bucket filled with ice.

“All right, a new drink calls for another toast. It’s a bit cliché, but here’s to a prosperous tomorrow.”

“To a prosperous tomorrow.”

With this oft-spoken wish, they made their third toast of the day. The akvavit, pleasantly chilled by the ice, was mild and smooth. The flavor was very pleasant; just as it slid down their throats, the grassy, herbal flavor of the caraway came through beautifully. However, this wasn’t a drink to be trifled with. Something this potent would soon go to one’s head.

“At the risk of being too forward, do you think it would be all right if I just

called you Dahlia? I'd like for you to call me Volf too, without the 'Sir.'"

"I wouldn't mind you calling me that, but...I don't think I'd feel right addressing *you* that way. I'm only a commoner."

"I understand. I'll get a scrivener to write up a certificate that says you can speak to me how you like without breaching etiquette."

What kind of horrifying joke was that? For one thing, no one would use a scrivener for something as frivolous as that, and for another, he hadn't quite grasped the problem with them being on such familiar terms. She shuddered to think what other women and nobles would think of it. It could affect her work.

"That's not quite the issue."

"I'm the youngest of my father's four sons. My mother was a baron's daughter. She's gone now, and her family's fallen from the nobility. I'm a Scalfarotto, but I can't use water magic, let alone any of the other schools. I'm going to quit the nobility some day and make my own way. We can speak to each other as friends and just call it practice for my commoner life."

The five major schools of magic included fire, water, air, earth, and healing. Having some talent in these schools was considered very important among the nobility.

"Couldn't you marry into a noble family?"

"An earl's son without any magical power is just an embarrassment. I could marry, but succession would be the problem. I'd have to adopt a boy or pass my estate on to a nephew or something. Most family lines come to an end if they lose their magical power. Besides, I think I'd just be treated as a trophy if I were to marry. And if I were to have a daughter, there'd be a lot of pressure on her. The family would want her to marry well and bring them more wealth and status."

"What a world you live in..."

She discovered from Volf afterward that it wasn't so uncommon for people to relinquish their noble status. Among high-ranking nobles, the eldest and most capable son would inherit the family title and the bulk of the wealth, with another son in reserve in case anything should happen to the first—in other

words, an heir and a spare. Any other sons were either married off or became commoners. Daughters were sometimes married off to wealthier and higher-ranked husbands, but most married a noble of equal or lower rank, a wealthy merchant, or a government official. The system was designed in such a way that the total number of nobles never really changed. Dahlia's father had been an honorary baron, but she was born and brought up as a commoner, so she knew almost nothing of the trappings of nobility.

"I suppose even nobles have it hard sometimes."

"Some men find it easier just being a married woman's lover. Our kingdom allows one man to have multiple wives and one woman to have multiple husbands, but not many women choose to have more than one spouse, unlike men. What you tend to see much more often are younger men in a casual relationship with married women."

The marriage system in this world was one thing that had taken Dahlia by surprise. The registration process was very similar to what she'd known in her first life, but there were some major differences here. In this kingdom, marriages between one man and multiple women, one woman and multiple men, and people of the same gender were all recognized. That said, marriages between one man and one woman were by far the most common type among commoners. The next most common was one man with multiple wives, often seen in wealthy merchant households and such. There were several reasons why the nobility practiced both polygyny and polyandry; it often had to do with the preservation of rare magical abilities, succession, or the protection of land and assets. At first glance, the nobles seemed to lead charmed lives, but the reality was perhaps not so rosy.

"Sorry, I went a bit off-topic there."

Volf smiled wryly as he filled both their glasses to the brim with akvavit.

"Say, Dahlia...if I brought you one of our swords, d'you think you could try enchanting it like you were saying? I'd pay you for your time and expenses, of course."

It didn't escape Dahlia's notice that he'd casually dropped the "Miss" from her name. Yet, oddly enough, she felt quite at ease with it.

“I don’t mind if we speak informally as long as it’s just when we’re alone. As for the sword—if I mess up the enchantment, then it’ll be ruined, so it’s probably best we start with a cheap shortsword...don’t you think, Volf?”

For one moment, Volf’s golden eyes opened wide, then he gave Dahlia a smile so dazzling it seemed to radiate sunbeams.

“Yeah. Brilliant! I can’t wait to get started, magical toolmaker Dahlia.”



Once they’d emptied their bottles of akvavit, Dahlia and Volf left the eatery. Darkness was just beginning to descend, turning evening into night.

“I’ll call a carriage for you.”

“No, that’s all right. The walk home will sober me up.”

A leisurely walk on an early summer evening sounded like a splendid idea. Luckily, Dahlia was wearing her new pants today; they were very comfortable to walk in.

“Let me at least walk you home then. I won’t try to impose on you, don’t worry.”

“I live out west, near the boundary wall. It’s quite far. The castle’s in the other direction.”

“It’s dangerous for a woman on her own, even at this hour.”

Volf seemed to be genuinely worried about her. Dahlia opened her bag and rummaged around for something.

“I appreciate the concern, but look, I have this. It’s called a freezing bangle; it’s made for self-defense. I’ll be fine as long as I wear this.”

“Is that a magical tool made with ice magic?”

“That’s right. You can buy them in stores. They’re potent enough to freeze a person’s limbs. I’ve strengthened mine a little bit, so I could use it on two or three people if I needed to.”

Dahlia knew the magical toolmaker who’d made these freezing bangles, and she’d sought their permission before modifying hers. With each use, the bangle

now could output as much freezing power as a large refrigerator. Where possible, Dahlia always made a point of finding out the maximum output and limits of any magical tool she obtained. She'd made it a rule ever since that day she'd accidentally made a flamethrower instead of a dryer, though she kept this detail to herself.

"Huh. So you can freeze them in place and then make your escape?"

"I'd go and call the guards on them or find someone in the neighborhood to help. It takes a while for the ice to melt. By the way, if you hit the frozen areas, you can easily break them. I've heard of some people getting caught attacking women, and...well, people soon made sure they'd never do it again!" Dahlia explained cheerfully.

"Whoa..."

Volf's imagination seemed to run away with him for a few moments before he quickly shook his head. She had a feeling he was thinking back on that incident with the coat last spring, so she couldn't help grinning.

Generally speaking, the royal capital was very safe. Even so, it was still dangerous for women to walk the streets alone at night, so almost all would travel by carriage after dark. Those who chose not to were sure to equip themselves with some form of self-defense, such as freezing bangles or defensive magic. She'd heard of some fools trying to attack a seemingly unarmed female mage, only to end up nearly roasted alive. After receiving basic treatment for any injuries, criminals like muggers and molesters were generally sentenced to manual labor, sent down to the mines, or forced out into the wilderness to cultivate the land. They would often work in these harsh conditions for the rest of their lives. These criminals were an important part of the kingdom's workforce, Dahlia had heard.

"What if I said I just wanted to talk with you a little longer? Then could I walk you back?"

"Of course. I don't mind, but it's a big detour for you, isn't it?"

"If I went back to the castle now, I'd end up doing some exercise anyway. Don't want to get rusty during this break."

The pair chatted as they walked side by side, the long road bathed in crimson light as the sun slowly dipped beneath the horizon. With the magical streetlamps not yet lit, the faces of the people passing were indistinct in the dusky light.

“I imagine the kind of training you do in the Order of Beast Hunters must be very tough.”

“It’s not so bad. We run a lot, tone our muscles with sit-ups and push-ups and all that, and spar with swords and spears. Now and then, the mages come along and send us all flying.”

“Sorry, what was that last bit?”

Running and sparring sounded perfectly standard, but what on earth would they be battered by mages for?

“We often deal with monsters that can breathe fire and whip up winds, so it’s practice for that. We get several mages to attack us at once in big blasts and work on avoiding the attacks, or standing up to them if we can. Yeah, you often get a couple of guys sent to the sick bay, but it’s good to have a chance to practice before the real thing.”

“Right, I suppose that makes sense. So tell me, what’s the biggest monster you’ve ever had to fight?”

“It’s got to be the wyvern. Anything with wings is a real pain to deal with. If they fly off, they’re pretty much impossible to chase down.”

“Aren’t the biggest monsters the most difficult?”

“Unless it’s a real behemoth, then size doesn’t make too much of a difference. Just makes them easier to hit, if anything.”

Huh? Was it just her imagination, or was he talking about terrifying monsters like they were good target practice? And exactly how big did a monster have to be to qualify as a behemoth? She was curious, yet she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know.

“Oh, speaking of difficult monsters, I hate the ones with lots of legs, like giant centipedes. You never know how they’re gonna move or where they’ll come at

you from.”

“I don’t even want to see something like that.”

“At least the likes of cyclops have only got two arms and two legs; if they come chasing after you, you just get out of the way. They’re not really that hard to handle.”

Volf made it sound so simple, but no normal human could expect to win *that* game of tag. The conversation only confirmed in Dahlia’s mind that the Beast Hunters’ legendary reputation was well deserved.

“You bought me all that food and drink today, so let’s forget about the potion, shall we? It sounds like you Beast Hunters have a hard enough life as it is.”

“I’m not forgetting about anything. On the contrary, you can shake me down for all the coin you like if you’ll make that enchanted sword for me.”

“I would never!”

She’d shouted at him again. How many times was that today? She’d lost count, and since it wasn’t likely to be the last time, she gave up keeping tally.



Nearly an hour of lively conversation followed before they finally stood in front of the tower Dahlia called home. By now, the sky had darkened enough that the pale crescent of the moon stood out sharply against the blue.

“So, this is your home. I’ve often noticed it in the distance when we’ve set off for missions from the west gate. I thought maybe a mage might live here, but no, it’s you.”

Volf blinked up at the tower in surprise.

“Yes, people call it the Green Tower.”

“Seems just right for a magical toolmaker, somehow.”

“I think so too. A long time ago, the capital’s outer wall used to stand here. When they knocked it down, my grandfather took some of the stone and used it to build this tower.”

“Was it some sort of experiment?”

“No, my grandfather produced magical lanterns, you see. He was dealing with a lot of fire crystals and needed a place in town to safely research them.”

“Right. If you’re making things with fire crystals, I guess a wooden building would be pretty risky.”

“Exactly. He didn’t want to risk starting a fire.”

In truth, starting a fire wasn’t the only concern. With minimal processing, a few fire crystals could turn into the equivalent of a bomb. After all, a simple miscalculation had turned Dahlia’s prototype dryer into a flamethrower. However, she had learned from her father that magical tools were rarely made into weapons.

The reason for that was the mages. The magical power of mages came in many varieties and strengths. Among water magic users, for instance, some could only fill a bathtub, some could fill a pool, some could create ice, and some could even combine their water magic with air magic to whip up a blizzard. In a sense, powerful mages *were* living weapons. Dahlia remembered an extraordinary display given by a fire mage once during a royal parade—a towering inferno of flame had shot up into the sky, taking the shape of an enormous dragon spreading its wings. Dahlia was just extremely thankful that she hadn’t been reborn into this kingdom during wartime.

“Well, here we are.”

Volf came to a halt in front of the tower’s gates. He handed her a leather pouch he’d been carrying. Inside were ten gilt silver coins—the cost of a potion was only five.

“This is too much.”

“No, that includes the cost of the meal and the carriage ride. Honestly, you saved my life that day, so please take it. I’ll get a lecture from the captain otherwise.”

“Very well, if you insist.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Would it be okay if I came by tomorrow to return your coat?”

“Yes, no problem.”

“Does late morning work? Ah, and if you happen to have time—I’m going to go visit a magical tool shop in the North District; would you like to come with me?”

The North District was where establishments that catered to the nobility plied their trade. She’d been to magical tool shops there only a handful of times with her father. She hadn’t been once this year. There might be new magical tools on sale that she’d never seen before—the mere thought sent her heart aflutter.

“Absolutely, I’d love to go with you,” she answered without any hesitation. “I’ll expect you tomorrow morning.”

“Great! See you in the morning, then.”

Volf bowed and turned to walk back the way he’d come.

“It’s, um, a little early, but...goodnight! Pleasant dreams.”

It was an everyday phrase in this kingdom, said to family and friends before they went to bed. Hearing it from Dahlia seemed to catch the knight off guard—the smile he gave her as he turned around was slightly bashful.

“Goodnight, Dahlia. Pleasant dreams.”

Interlude: Withering Happiness

Tobias had been living in the new house since the day after he and Dahlia had broken off the engagement. Emilia had joined him a day later than intended. News of what had happened between him and Dahlia had spread quickly from the Merchants' Guild. If Emilia had been working the reception desk at Orlando & Co., she might have been subjected to all kinds of rumors, so Tobias brought her to stay in the house for the time being instead.

Tobias had been bracing for harsh criticism after his sudden decision to leave Dahlia. However, to his surprise, there wasn't much opposition—if anything, his mother had actually encouraged him. She seemed to think it was a great opportunity for the family to create ties with Viscount Tallini. His mother had appeared to get along very well with Dahlia until then, so in truth, he'd been taken aback by her reaction. His older brother was away in a neighboring kingdom buying up stock, so he hadn't been here to oppose Tobias's decision. No doubt he'd have something to say when he got home, though.

Tobias had intended to take some time off work after marrying Dahlia. But now, those plans had been turned upside down. Not only had he been forced to pay her damages for breaking off the engagement, but there had been the cost of moving Emilia into the new house as well. His priority at the moment was to find some new work as soon as possible—which was why he was currently sitting in the workshop, sifting through the documents there. Up until now, he'd left it to Dahlia to work out the cost price of their products, but he couldn't rely on her anymore. They weren't very difficult calculations; he was sure Emilia would be able to take care of them. It would be a good excuse to spend time together here in the workshop too. Pleased with the thought, Tobias called Emilia from her room.

"Could you total up the prices in this chart? You just need to start at the top and add as you go down."

"I'm really sorry, Tobias... I'll be too slow. I'm not very good with numbers."

She looked so discomfited that Tobias immediately gave up on the idea, looking around for something else for her to do instead.

“In that case, could you maybe write out those labels for the raincoats?”

“Um, m-my writing isn’t very neat... I don’t think I could do them as nicely as the example.”

The one who’d written that example label had been Dahlia. The letters were clear and neat, slightly slanting up to the right. Emilia’s hand, meanwhile, was a little untidy. He couldn’t blame her for not wanting to be compared.

“Your toolmaking work looks so difficult to me, and I don’t really understand anything about it, so I was just staying out of the way in my room.”

“That’s all right; I understand. Do you think you could manage dinner, then?”

“Dinner? Don’t you hire a cook if you’re not eating out?” Emilia replied, her light-brown eyes wide.

Since they’d begun living together several days ago, Emilia had made him tea many times, but never dinner. They’d gone out to a restaurant every evening. Perhaps for someone connected to a viscount, this was what normal married life was like. Tobias would have to speak to his mother and see if they could find a maid. As he mulled over this thought, he watched Emilia leave the room, then gathered the papers in front of him. He got down to crafting, making a magical dryer. As he worked, he happened to notice that he was low on the polishing powder he used to give the items a smooth finish.

“Dahlia—”

Tobias turned around and then froze, shocked. He’d called Dahlia’s name out of pure habit. The two of them had been engaged for two years, and they had spent the last year working side by side. He’d begun to take it for granted that she would always be there. Tobias heaved a deep and bitter sigh. Just as he composed himself and was about to get back to work, a timid knock came at the door.

“I’m sorry to disturb you while you’re working... You didn’t happen to see my amber brooch among the luggage, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I think I put it in the closet.”

“Sorry, I wouldn’t know what’s in there.”

He’d managed to buy Emilia a closet at short notice, but he’d never looked to see what she’d put inside.

“I wonder if it got mixed up with her things during the move.”

“Oh, you mean *Dahlia’s* closet?”

“It doesn’t matter; it was just a little trinket. I should never have put it in there. When you said I could come and live with you, I was so happy, I wasn’t thinking properly—I put all my things inside the closet as soon as I arrived. Anyway, please don’t worry about it.”

With that, Emilia left the workshop again, looking forlorn.

Dahlia’s closet had been delivered to the house a few days before they’d broken off the engagement. It had still been here when Emilia had arrived. He could only think that it must have been taken away with her brooch inside by accident. *Nothing for it. I’ll have to go and speak to her*, Tobias thought grimly. For the second time that evening, he breathed a heavy sigh.



Later that evening, Tobias once again made his way to the Green Tower. He touched the gate to open it as he’d always done, only to find it didn’t budge, refusing him entry. He rang the bell at the side of the gate, twice. After about a minute, Dahlia finally appeared.

“Can I help you, Mr. Orlando?”

She wouldn’t even use his first name anymore, treating him like a complete stranger. Tobias looked through the bars at the woman on the other side of the gate. Since they’d broken off their engagement, she’d become a completely different person. Her dark-brown hair was back to its natural red, and much shorter. Her features were glamorously accentuated with makeup. The baggy, dark-gray outfit she always used to wear had been replaced with a flatteringly fitted white shirt and long, black skirt. Even her black-rimmed glasses were

gone, nothing obstructing her once-diffident gaze. Her vivid green eyes now looked squarely into his, unflinching. It made him uneasy looking at this version of Dahlia, who was so opposite to the woman he'd known. And yet, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. He felt utterly pathetic.

"Dahlia, you didn't take Emilia's brooch back here, did you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You didn't find an amber brooch in your closet?"

Dahlia narrowed her eyes in a catlike manner as she looked at him.

"I certainly did not. I brought everything that belonged to me—nothing more, nothing less."

"Emilia's mistaken, then?"

"Indeed, she is. We emptied everything out of the closet and dresser and left the contents there. If you don't believe me, then go and speak to the Merchants' Guild. I hired a scrivener to make sure everything was correct. It was Dominic."

"You hired a scrivener for *that*?"

Employing a scrivener, even just for a short while, was not cheap. It struck Tobias as rather careful planning—*too* careful.

"It was Marcello's idea. He said there are often disputes over property when couples part ways," Dahlia said coolly, as if she'd read his thoughts.

In fairness, it had been a very sudden split, and at the eleventh hour too. Even if she were the scheming type, there hadn't been that much time. If it had been Marcello's recommendation, then Tobias hadn't any right to complain.

"Was there anything else?"

"No. No, that's all, Dahlia."

"Don't call me that anymore, please. Next time we meet, I expect you to call me Miss Rossetti. I'd rather people didn't get the wrong idea, especially not your new bride."

"Right..."

As soon as Tobias had agreed, Dahlia curtly bid him good night and turned to walk back to the tower. Something stopped her partway. She looked back, and for just a moment, there was a darkness in her emerald-green eyes.

“I just remembered—I don’t need that bed I bought us anymore. You can have it as a wedding present.”

After giving him the frostiest of smiles, she set off for the tower again without a second glance. There was nothing Tobias could do but stand in silence and watch her go.



Emilia Tallini’s earliest memories were of the workers’ apartment she had shared with her mother. She had spent her days playing with the neighborhood children and helping her mother with chores; it felt like a very ordinary life. However, ever since she was small, her mother had told her again and again, “You should have been a noble lady.”

Emilia had never met her father. He was a viscount, she was told. His family had opposed the love between him and her mother and forced them apart. As long as she’d lived, Emilia’s mother had treasured the pendant that she’d received from him, engraved with his family’s coat of arms. The young Emilia knew nothing of what it meant to be a noble. Her kind, gentle mother was all she needed to be happy.

When she was a little older, Emilia’s mother insisted she go to elementary school. She surely wished for her daughter to get a good education and marry happily, as she’d been unable to. However, once she went to school, Emilia learned an important lesson: the nobility lived a world apart. In principle, every pupil was equal, but in reality, the boundary between the rich aristocrats and the commoners was painfully clear. When her mother fell ill, Emilia decided she would not go to high school, devotedly caring for her until her death. Even on the day of her mother’s funeral, Emilia’s father did not appear, nor at any time afterward.

Now faced with making a living for herself, Emilia began to search for work and was soon introduced to a company called Orlando & Co. It was here she had first laid eyes on Tobias Orlando. His light-brown hair looked so soft. His

handsome face always held a gentle expression. He was always kind and perfectly polite. This man who fascinated her so was one of the company's employees—a magical toolmaker.

Though he wasn't a rich noble, Emilia felt a man like him would surely make his future wife very happy. Tobias's fiancée was called Dahlia. She was a very plain, unremarkable young woman. She didn't seem well suited to Tobias at all. Whenever she was helping Tobias with his work, she looked more like his assistant or secretary than his fiancée. When Emilia heard that Dahlia was the daughter of Tobias's master, it all made sense. The engagement must have been arranged for business reasons. She found herself beginning to feel sorry for Tobias.

One day, Emilia and Tobias were having lunch together while he gave her advice about work. He happened to mention his upcoming marriage. It was mere days before he and Dahlia would move into their new house and become husband and wife. Emilia told him she had never seen a big family home before. To her surprise, he offered to show her around the new house.

The moment she stepped over the threshold, she suddenly knew. She loved him. There was nothing in the world she wanted more than a man like him to protect and adore her. Emilia burst into tears and confessed her feelings on the spot—and Tobias accepted them.

"I'll leave Dahlia," he said. "We can live in this house together."

She ended up staying there all night. She felt so lucky, so blessed. Tobias was going to take care of her now. They were going to live happily ever after—she really believed it. She filled the closet with her clothes. In the dresser, she placed the keepsake from her father: the pendant engraved with the Tallini coat of arms. She did this deliberately in the hope that her father's name would protect them.

As it turned out, there was no need to have been so guarded. She soon heard that the engagement had been broken off; it was resolved quickly and without argument. She moved into the house immediately afterward and had been happily living with Tobias ever since. He was so sweet to her.

However, one afternoon when they were at a restaurant for lunch, Tobias

suddenly called out to a woman sitting on the terrace. He called her “Dahlia.” Emilia didn’t understand how he could have possibly recognized the woman, nor did she want to. To Emilia, she looked like a total stranger. She was shocked when she realized it was indeed her. Dahlia’s dark-brown hair was now dyed vivid red, and her baggy clothes had been replaced with a flattering, expensive-looking ensemble. Her bookish glasses were gone, her face made up with a refined, mature look. She was completely transformed.

She looked so much more beautiful and glamorous than she had before. What if Tobias was lured back to her? The moment that thought crossed her mind, Emilia sprang into action.

“I’m so sorry! I never meant to hurt you... I’ve been wanting to apologize to you this whole time...”

Her words were only half-true. She did feel sorry for what had happened to Dahlia, but more than that, she was jealous. Most of all, she was deeply afraid of losing Tobias. That was why she was so relieved when he stepped in to defend her.

“Emilia, you’ve done nothing wrong! I’m the one to blame.”

Despite Emilia’s tearful apology, Dahlia seemed completely unmoved, explaining in the most concise possible manner that she had no interest in talking. Tobias had abandoned her, and she’d lost her new house, yet she didn’t seem downcast in the slightest.

The man who appeared then was like a prince who’d stepped from the pages of a fairy tale. Emilia had never seen such a beautiful man in all her life. He was tall and lean with glossy black hair and skin as pale and smooth as porcelain. His brows formed gently sloping, graceful curves, and his long lashes framed eyes that were like two pools of molten gold. The man’s features seemed to have been sculpted by the hands of a goddess. An elegant smile curved his slender lips as he took Dahlia’s hand, escorting her from the restaurant as though she were a princess.

Emilia supposed she and Tobias must have had a meal together after that, but she couldn’t remember a single thing she’d eaten or what it had tasted like. Volfred Scalfarotto was a royal knight and a son of the earl famous for bringing

water to every citizen in the kingdom. Emilia couldn't imagine how he and Dahlia could possibly be connected. Why would the likes of *Dahlia* be with a highborn nobleman like him? Why would he treat her with such warmth? She couldn't stop thinking about it.

Ever since that day, Tobias had become just a little quieter. Every now and then, Emilia would find herself overcome by a vague but powerful sense of anxiety. One evening in the workshop, Tobias asked her to do some calculations and write out labels for the raincoats, as Dahlia had done before, but she couldn't stand to be compared. She was so frightened of Tobias being disappointed in her when he found she wasn't as capable as Dahlia. She had only ever cooked in a tiny kitchen; she wasn't used to the large one in this house. They'd be better off hiring a cook or eating out anyway. Tobias had plenty of money, so that expense should have been nothing to him.

Still, the shortness of that conversation in the workshop made Emilia uneasy, and she went back to offer him some tea. It was then that she heard Tobias speak Dahlia's name. She couldn't have actually been there, yet he called to her as though he expected her to be right there beside him. Emilia couldn't stand it. Before she knew it, she found herself telling Tobias a lie—that she'd put her amber brooch inside Dahlia's closet. She thought perhaps he'd offer to buy her a new one, or that he'd be annoyed with Dahlia. Instead, he left for Dahlia's house to ask her about it.

When he returned, he looked incredibly weary. He told her she must have made a mistake and to search for it again. He seemed to look right through her. The weight of Emilia's anxiety only grew heavier. She thought she'd finally been blessed with true happiness. Now, that happiness seemed to be withering just as quickly as it had blossomed. No matter how she tried, Emilia simply couldn't understand why.

Stepping Out Together

The previous day, a shipment of cloth sheets had arrived at the Green Tower. This was the material Dahlia would use to create the waterproof covers ordered by the Couriers' Guild. She closely inspected every individual sheet. Satisfied with their quality, she carefully measured out the amounts of blue slime powder and other chemicals she would need, then created her solution. Adjusting for the warm weather, she added a little extra water to it. Next, all that was needed was to spread out the sheets and thoroughly coat them in the blue slime mixture before applying a fixing spell.

By the time she'd finished several sheets, Dahlia was quite hot, so she decided to take a break. It was then that Tobias had turned up at her gates. She was utterly baffled by the questions he asked her. She had never so much as laid eyes on this amber brooch. Midway through the conversation, she found herself thanking Marcello from the bottom of her heart for suggesting that they hire the scrivener. She had thought that the matter would be closed by now, though. She was irked at Tobias's rudeness and the total lack of apologies—that was what made her promise him that bed as a wedding present. She knew it was in poor taste, but considering everything that had happened, she could surely be forgiven for this.

Once Tobias had left, Dahlia went and double-checked the cloths to be sure that the waterproofing mixture had properly adhered. She didn't want to have any problems tomorrow when she and Volf were to go out together. She ended up working late into the night.

The next day, Dahlia woke up a little later than usual. She hurriedly ate her breakfast of bread dipped into some milk. Once she had properly woken up, she got dressed and did her makeup, taking care to get it just right. After a little mulling, she decided her hyacinth-blue ensemble with the navy skirt would be the best choice for their destination: a magical tool shop for nobles. The skirt had slits in it, making it easy to walk in. Folds of lace sewn behind the slits maintained the garment's elegant look even as the wearer climbed on and off

of carriages. Dahlia put her hair up with a simple black barrette and placed her coin purse, a handkerchief, a notebook, and her makeup into a bag. With that, she was ready to go.

However, she was a little early—noon was still a while off. Wondering what the temperature was like outside, she opened the window, only to see a man in a hooded black coat waiting outside the tower gates. He was conspicuously tall. Dahlia immediately rushed down the stairs.

“Good morning! Er, we *did* say late morning, didn’t we?”

Suddenly, she was worried that she’d misheard the agreed time.

“Yes, sorry. I knew this place was a fair distance from the castle, so I left early. Looks like I hurried a bit *too* much, though.”

What are you, a kid on field trip day? Did you cast your strengthening spell and decide to practice racewalking? And can you stop looking at me like a naughty puppy?! Her mind spinning with all sorts of retorts, Dahlia quickly opened the gate.

“Come into the hall. I’ll be ready in a moment.”

“Please, don’t rush on my account. I shouldn’t have turned up so early. Here—I brought your coat. Thanks again for lending it to me.”

“I’m glad it came in handy.”

She took her father’s black coat and returned it to its place on the second floor. After checking to make sure she hadn’t left her fire burning, she grabbed her bag and hurried downstairs to the entrance hall.

“I was thinking that after we visit the magical tool shops in the North District, we could go and have lunch somewhere. Unless you have plans for later?”

“No, I’ve reached a good stopping point in my work. We can take all the time we need.”

The two of them boarded an omnibus that ran near the tower and rode it into the city center. Volf then found a carriage to take them to the North District. Each time they boarded and alighted from the carriages, Volf gave Dahlia his hand, escorting her as though she were a noble lady. She told him there was no

need for such chivalry, but he explained that he'd been brought up with these manners and they were natural to him now, so she let it go. A nobleman's life wasn't all champagne and roses, it seemed. She was reminded of her father, poring over a guide to noble etiquette from early morning in preparation for a dinner party. She was sure it must have given him just the same stomachache she had now.



As the sun soared higher in the sky, blazing brightly, the flagstones underfoot turned from reddish brown to gray. The change in color signaled that they had entered the North District, the aristocrats' quarter. Surprisingly, commoners were free to come and go here, and they were welcome in most of the shops. That said, only those with fairly fat wallets could afford to patronize them.

Here in the royal capital, nobles didn't get away with blatantly high-handed behavior simply on account of their status. If one ran down a commoner in their carriage, for example, both they and the driver would be considered guilty of a crime and compelled to compensate the victim. Deliberately killing or harming commoners was, of course, completely out of the question. That said, there were certainly some nobles who found ways to use and abuse their position; in legal disputes, it tended to be the commoner who came off worse.

"Here at last..."

Volf climbed down from the carriage, pulling down his hood before having a good stretch. Today he was dressed in a white shirt and dark navy pants. On his feet were a pair of shiny wholecut shoes. The outfit was simple, but on *him*, these ordinary clothes seemed to suddenly transform into high fashion. Dahlia had often heard that clothes had the power to bring out people's beauty. The man in front of her had her wondering if it worked in reverse too.

"Won't you be hot in that coat?" she asked.

Summers in the capital could be sweltering. Wearing that black coat outdoors on a day like this was asking for heatstroke.

"Yeah, I think I'll change over to wearing glasses. Not that they're much protection."

She sensed the young knight's woe in that word—the “protection” against his own beauty. As they set off down the street, talking as they went, Dahlia soon noticed the astonishing power Volf had to draw the gaze of nearly every passing woman. Invariably, those gazes shifted to her next. Some of the women looked puzzled, while others smirked. Most unpleasantly, those with friends would lean over to whisper to them as they walked past. Dahlia couldn't be sure what they were saying, but her imagination filled in. No doubt they were saying something like “What an odd pair” or “He could do better.” Nothing kind, at any rate.

“Sorry about this. I'll keep the coat on until we get to the store.”

“Don't worry about them,” Dahlia said firmly.

After all, she and Volf weren't lovers or fiancés. There was no reason for them to care what these people thought. Dahlia was far more concerned about Volf overheating in that coat.

“It's so hot. It feels like summer's come early this year.”

“Yeah. It's so bright out already,” Volf replied, blinking frequently in the sunlight.

“Are your eyes still bothering you?”

“It's not that; they should be fine now. It's just that I'm so used to wearing a hood when I go out. It feels bright when I take it off.”

The discomfort in his narrowed eyes was clear to see as he spoke. With a hood always shading his face, it was no wonder he was dazzled by the sunshine. It bothered her a little to see him like that.

“I thought we could visit The Silver Bough and The Goddess's Right Eye. Sound good?”

“Perfect. I can't wait to see what they have.”

Dahlia had been to The Silver Bough with her father before. It carried all sorts of magical tools useful in daily life, as well as the kinds favored by the nobility. As for the other shop, The Goddess's Right Eye, she'd heard the name but never been. It was located close to the castle. First-time customers could only enter

with a letter of introduction from a regular. Needless to say, it made the prospect of visiting somewhat daunting.

Volf folded up his coat and tucked it under his arm before offering Dahlia his hand.

“We’ll have to be on our best behavior while we’re inside. So, *Miss Dahlia*, will you kindly allow me to escort you?”

“Certainly. I shall do my best, but please guide me if I forget my manners.”

It felt rather strange to speak to each other so formally. Judging from Volf’s expression, he felt the same—he looked as if it made him itch.

“Anything for magical tools, right? We can do this,” Dahlia assured him.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Volf gently clasped her hand in his, and together they stepped through the doors of The Silver Bough.



It had been more than a year since Dahlia had set foot in The Silver Bough. Its three floors were stocked with a wide range of magical tools. Many were the kind that simply added a little convenience to everyday life, while others were sophisticated devices only of real interest to the nobility. The shop wasn’t very wide, but it went a long way back, far more spacious inside than it appeared from the street. The doorway was adorned with a beautifully handcrafted silver branch that gleamed in the sunlight.

“Welcome to The Silver Bough.”

They were warmly greeted by a woman in a navy-blue suit with white lapels. Though Dahlia had come here several times with her father, she had never met this woman before.

“If there is something in particular you’re looking for today, I would be happy to show you where to find it.”

“We don’t have anything in particular in mind,” Volf replied. “Would it be all right if we just had a look around?”

“Of course. Please feel free to browse at your leisure, and don’t hesitate to

call if there's anything I can assist you with. You too of course, madam; please let me know if I can help you in any way at all."

The shop assistant addressed both Volf and Dahlia with exactly the same bright smile, and Dahlia felt a swell of appreciation. The attitude of those women they'd passed on the street must have bothered her more than she'd realized.

"Thank you very much. I'd be very grateful for your advice," Dahlia replied, and the woman acknowledged her with another gracious smile. It was enough to make her think she'd better start working on a "customer service smile" of her own.

From the entrance, Volf and Dahlia decided to move clockwise around the shop, examining the shelves as they went. The first row of shelves they came to held a variety of magical tools for daily use in the home—the equivalent of domestic appliances in Dahlia's previous world. This was the field she was most comfortable in and the one she loved most. While magic added convenience to some aspects of daily life in this world, generally speaking, it was considerably more difficult. Back in Japan, manufacturers and craftspeople had worked under a stoic motto: "No hardship is too great to improve the customers' quality of life." Even disregarding the vast differences in the circumstances and history of Japan and the kingdom where Dahlia lived now, it was abundantly clear that such an ethos wouldn't work here.

Nevertheless, once a person had a taste of an easier life, they wouldn't easily give up on it. When Dahlia was small, she'd wanted a steady supply of hot and cold water in the bath and sinks. Having to use fire crystals to make hot water in a separate bucket or barrel every time was far too much work. After enough pestering, her father finally started working on it and, through some trial and error, managed to create a magical tool that provided hot water on demand. The next year, he registered it with the Merchants' Guild, and now it was a fixture in almost every home in the kingdom.

Hair drying, too, had been a slow process with air crystals alone. Wanting a proper dryer, Dahlia had combined air and fire crystals and, with her father's help, created one. The fact that the prototype had turned out to be a flamethrower was neither here nor there.

Her father had always worn a sand lizard skin coat in the rain. Its waterproofing properties were good, but unless it was completely dried out after each use, it began to smell. She had wanted to make her father a better raincoat, but there had been no such thing as waterproof fabric in this world. This problem was what had led her to create her waterproof cloth made with powdered slime.

The compact magical stove she'd registered with the guild last month had been born from her desire to enjoy cooking a winter hot pot at the table with her father. Sadly, she'd completed the invention too late for that dream to ever be realized, but she'd heard it was already selling well among travelers and campers. Her dream now was to see the stove used in restaurants, friends and families huddled around simmering pots of stew. "No hardship is too great to improve the customers' quality of life." Perhaps, somewhere along the way, that had become Dahlia's motto as a magical toolmaker.

The goods on sale at The Silver Bough had changed considerably since last year. Many of them now came in compact versions and had improved capabilities. Even so, she was delighted to see a hot water dispenser almost identical to her father's initial design sitting on the first shelf. There were also dryers, irons and such, as well as something called a "book ainer" that was for drying out parchment to prevent it molding.

The bestsellers at this time of year appeared to be the "cool pot" and the refrigerator. A cool pot was the opposite of a keep-warm pot—it used water or ice magic to keep its contents cool for long periods of time. It was very useful for chilling dishes and ingredients. It went without saying that the larger refrigerator was the more desirable option, but at the moment, they were still very expensive. The largish refrigerator that Dahlia had had in her kitchen in her previous world would cost four gold in this one—triple the price. What's more, the refrigerators here had only about two-thirds the storage space of the one she'd owned.

The price of ice crystals—which were considerably more expensive than water crystals—also made them very costly to run. Considering the money required to maintain these refrigerators, it was clear why they weren't yet a feature of most ordinary kitchens. Dahlia herself had a small one in the tower.

Perhaps it would be worth doing some tinkering to see if she could make its crystal usage more efficient.

“A few of these big ones around the barracks would keep everything cool.”

She looked over to see Volf gazing ardently at the largest model of refrigerator.

“Do you only have small ones at the moment?”

“Yes, *too* small.”

“It’s an awful nuisance when you can’t fit things in, isn’t it?”

That would be especially true in the coming summer months. Volf leaned in a little closer.

“Not that there’s ever anything in them but drink.”

She fought not to burst out laughing as he whispered into her ear.

The next area was reserved for some of the larger magical tools, including this world’s equivalents of washing machines and cleaning devices. The limitations of this world likely made it quite difficult to develop the kind of washing machines Dahlia had known in her previous life. The existence of purifying magic and water magic meant it was cheaper to simply take clothes to a launderer for washing. Dahlia had only a small washing machine at home that she used for small articles like underwear.

There were a variety of magical tools for cleaning. One came with air crystals and blew away dust in place of a feather duster. Another took the form of a broom paired with water crystals. Yet another used fire crystals to dry out the dirt on stone or brick floors so it could be easily swept away. One of the more expensive models combined air crystals and crystals imbued with purifying magic to send a cleansing breeze gusting through your rooms. *That’d be perfect for spring cleaning in the tower*, Dahlia thought.

One thing Dahlia didn’t see here—and thought would be a very useful addition—was anything resembling a microwave. Unfortunately, there were no such things as electric crystals, and the likes of electromagnetic waves had yet to be discovered. She’d quizzed her father several times about the crystals, but

the answer had always been clear: he'd never seen or heard of any. Lightning did occur in this world; that, at least, was certain. Dahlia could only pray that some bright scientist would unlock its hidden potential sooner rather than later.

Once Dahlia and Volf had seen all there was on the first floor, they climbed the stairs to the second. The magical tools here were mainly aimed at the noble classes. It was an altogether more fantastical scene than the floor below. The anti-eavesdropping device Volf had used yesterday was here along with a host of other curious items. The first to catch Dahlia's eye was something called a voice amplifier. It was essentially a form of speaker. As the name suggested, it could be used to amplify the volume of people's voices or music, so that the sound could be widely broadcast. It seemed they were often used on large estates to convey orders and make emergency announcements. Right beside the voice amplifiers were the indispensable anti-eavesdropping devices. Apparently, nobles used them all the time when dining out, even when they weren't discussing anything of consequence. Dahlia suspected many commoners would find it hard to understand that way of thinking.

The next set of shelves was lined with a variety of lamps and other lighting fixtures. There were all kinds, from regular floor lamps to desk lamps, bedside lamps, and even chandeliers. The light produced by magic crystals was very bright and came in a wide range of tones. Some recent developments included lights that enhanced the appearance of your skin and desk lamps that helped to reduce eye strain. As she read the information about them, Dahlia was impressed to see the same kinds of innovations as she had in her previous world. She also came across some less benign products: a bedside lamp with a concealed ice blade for self-defense and a fire crystal chandelier that burned everything in a ten-meter radius when dropped. She decided to pretend she hadn't seen these frightening objects. *When would you even need to use these things?* On second thought, she'd rather not know.

Right at the back of the shop, Dahlia discovered a lamp with a shade made of fairy glass. From one side, the shade looked opaque, the light inside giving off a milky-white glow. However, as she walked around it, the shade turned crystal clear; she could see right through it to the other side of the room. Fairy glass was a kind of iridescent magical crystal found in fairy dwellings or places fairies

had been. There were two theories regarding its origin: some said the fairies made it, while others posited that they left it behind when they died. It seemed the particular kind of magic imbued in it prevented detection, helping fairies to stay concealed.

Fairy glass was very expensive and extremely challenging to work with. A few years ago, her father had gotten the idea to try making her a bedroom window out of it. Despite her best efforts to dissuade him, he acquired the materials and set to work one day while she was out. The only result was three gold squandered in a matter of hours. She'd been rather shocked that a talented magical toolmaker like her father had been unable to handle it. She could still remember grumpily cleaning up the smithereens of fairy glass from the workshop floor. Her father hadn't been allowed a single drink that night.

Dahlia pushed the memory away and moved on, coming across a glass display case filled with glittering accessories. They weren't just decorative baubles—these too were magical tools. Most of these self-defense accessories made use of ice magic—such as freezing bangles like the one Dahlia owned—but there were also some with fire magic that would roast your assailant like a turkey. There were rings and earrings that prevented poisoning, anemia, petrification, and confusion, and bracelets that surrounded the wearer with a magical barrier, to name a few. Dahlia suspected that most of these were the work of alchemists rather than magical toolmakers. Some of the accessories even had dual effects—she saw a bangle which protected against both petrification *and* confusion. How they managed to layer the enchantments like that was a mystery to her.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been off in my own world here.”

“That’s all right. I’m just glad to see you’re having fun.”

Dahlia hadn't spoken a word since they'd come up to the second floor, forgetting about Volf's existence entirely as she'd gazed along the shelves and cabinets. Yet he seemed to be enjoying himself as he looked at her.

“Do you see anything you like?”

“It's *all* fascinating.”

It was rather stifling only being able to make polite remarks here inside the

shop. She looked forward to getting outside so they could talk more freely.

On their way out, Volf purchased a gold ring with an anti-poisoning enchantment.

“I’d like this ring, please.”

Many of the monsters in this world possessed poison or venom; such accessories must have been very important to the Beast Hunters.

Once the transaction was complete and Dahlia and Volf had expressed their gratitude, the shop assistant politely showed them out.



“So, how did you like The Silver Bough?”

“I loved it,” Dahlia replied happily.

The sun beat down on the gray stone pavement beneath their feet as they talked on the way to the next shop.

“I was last there with my father about a year ago. I noticed that a lot of the domestic tools like hot water dispensers and dryers have become much more compact since then. The improvements in efficiency are really impressive. All the magical tool shops for commoners sell older, bigger models.”

“I didn’t realize the sizes could change all that much. Isn’t there a point where they get *too* small?”

“Oh, I’m only talking about a few centimeters, but it makes all the difference in how the product feels. And different sizes have different uses, of course. Something might be just right for an adult man, but a child’s hands are much smaller, right? A smaller model of dryer, for example, would mean they could start using it on their own sooner. A lighter model would be easier for elderly people to manage on their own too.”

“I see; that makes a lot of sense.”

Volf once again put on his coat and pulled up the hood. Dahlia had said not to worry about the stares of the passersby, but he made the excuse of the sunlight being too glaring.

“Some bigger refrigerators would be good, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, there’s nothing better than an ice-cold drink in the summer. When we’ve got the mages with us, they can make all the ice we need. Only trouble is that your ale gets all watery if you put ice in it.”

“You can’t beat an ale on a hot day, can you?”

The age of majority in this kingdom was sixteen. That was the age from which, among other things, you were permitted to drink alcohol. Since her sixteenth birthday, Dahlia had enjoyed drinking with her father now and then. He could handle his liquor pretty well—he’d been a kingsnake too. She’d probably inherited her tolerance from him.

“You never fill a few buckets with ice and put your bottles in there?”

“Trouble is, we’ve got more kingsnakes and sea serpents than you can shake a stick at in the knights. We get through ale way too fast for a few buckets. A few *bathtubs* would be more like it.”

“Right. When you put it that way, I can see why you need refrigerators.”

“I wish they’d spare a bit of the budget for that.”

It seemed the knights’ ranks were full of insatiable drinkers, and even in a world of fantasy, budgeting was an eternal headache.

“What did you make of the magical tools for nobles?” Volf asked her.

“Those were amazing. I never would have thought there’d be so many different types of anti-eavesdroppers. The accessories surprised me too. Some of them had quite powerful fire magic, and a few were even double-enchanted. Getting two different enchantments into objects of that size must take incredible skill.”

“Anything in particular you liked?”

“The lamp with the fairy glass shade. Such an interesting effect.”

“I guess a magical toolmaker would see it that way. To me, it looked like they just used it for aesthetic appeal.”

“Fairy glass has a special effect that prevents detection. From one angle, it looked like just a pretty lamp, but as you walked around it, the glass turned clear; sometimes it even shows you illusions. You can easily use fairy glass to

watch people without being noticed.”

“Dahlia, are you *sure* you’re not friends with any secret agents or anything?”

He’d asked her that once before. Was what she said so strange? The lamp existed already; surely its maker would also have seen its potential for something like a magic mirror.

“Of course I’m sure. I mean, the technology’s already there; I wouldn’t be surprised if they use it in the castle already. Perhaps you just don’t notice.”

“Right, this is starting to sound scary, so I’m not asking any more questions,” Volf said with a slightly wry smile.

Time flew by as they talked, and they soon arrived in front of their next destination, The Goddess’s Right Eye. The façade was made of polished white marble. The pure-white door, surrounded by decorative golden vines, was flanked by pillars beautifully carved with the form of a goddess and cascades of flowers. The shop had an extraordinary presence. She wouldn’t have dreamed of going inside if she’d been by herself.

“This is The Goddess’s Right Eye. The owner’s a magical toolmaker himself, and a baron at that.”

“I see. Do you know his name?”

“I think it was Oswald Zola.”

“Ah, he’s the inventor of the cooling fan!”

“That was him? I didn’t know.”

The cooling fan was a magical tool that used water crystals and air crystals to produce a cooling breeze in summer, just like an electric fan. It had existed since Dahlia was a child, so this Oswald Zola was obviously a seasoned craftsman. It was her father who’d told her about the inventor of the cooling fan. Every year, when summer came around, he’d sit in front of it with a glass of ale and shout into the fan, “All hail Oswald Zolaaa!” in an odd, wobbly voice. Looking back, it wasn’t the most conventional drinking style.

“How wonderful to see you again, Sir Volfred. And you’ve brought a beautiful young lady as well.”

As they entered the shop, they were greeted with a bow by a mature gentleman in a black suit with white gloves. His dark-gray hair was smoothed back, his sharp silver eyes framed by a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles. He was the very image of an elegant silver fox.

“It’s very good to be back. This is Miss Dahlia Rossetti. She’s a magical toolmaker who’s been a great help to me lately.”

“Thank you very much for introducing us. Miss Rossetti, I am Oswald Zola, owner of The Goddess’s Right Eye. Please feel free to call me Oswald.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you. I’m only a novice toolmaker, so I’d be immensely grateful for your guidance. Please call me Dahlia.”

Narrowing his already sharp eyes, Oswald peered curiously at Dahlia.

“Excuse me if I’m mistaken, Miss Dahlia, but might you be the daughter of the late Carlo Rossetti?”

“I am indeed. Were you acquainted with my father?”

“We attended high school together. He and I also met at the barons’ dinners from time to time... I was so distressed to hear of his passing. Please accept my deepest condolences.”

“Thank you; that’s very kind of you.”

So, Oswald had been her father’s classmate at high school. She’d never known.

“Do come inside. Look around as much as you like. I always value the opinion of a fellow toolmaker, Miss Dahlia.”

“Oh, I’m only a beginner, though.”

Oswald looked back and smiled at her as she and Volf proceeded into the shop. It was quite expansive inside. Compared to the previous shop, each product was given a larger display space. As before, there was a wide range of magical tools, from appliance-types to accessories, but Dahlia got the sense that the collection was carefully curated. Each item was accompanied by a piece of parchment explaining how to use it. Somewhat unnervingly, however, there wasn’t a single price tag in sight.

“This is a new model of anti-eavesdropper, isn’t it?”

“Yes, this one comes in the form of cufflinks. Simply rest your hand upon the table and it will activate automatically. I offer it in a range of metals and stones to suit any outfit.”

“And is this a wall-hanging version of the cooling fan?”

“Indeed. I heard many customers preferred to mount their fan on the wall in order to save space, so I created this wall-hanging version.”

It was so much fun seeing the latest advances in magical tools. Each time Volf or Dahlia noticed something interesting and stopped, Oswald would quietly approach and give them a detailed explanation of the item when asked. His observation and timing were to be admired.

The shop stocked an impressive range of accessories. Unbelievably, there were not only double-enchanted, but even several *triple*-enchanted items on display. Compared to The Silver Bough, the items were more exquisitely crafted and were often set with gemstones.

“Enchantments to prevent poisoning, petrification, and confusion in just one ring... This is absolutely tremendous work.”

“Many knights and adventurers consider it very important that the accessories they use in battle are lightweight. These rings are crafted by an alchemist.”

How on earth that alchemist managed this feat, she couldn’t imagine. In any case, she could tell just from looking at the ring that it would take someone with formidable magical ability to create such a thing. Three separate rings would come much cheaper, but one would, of course, be much lighter on the hand. Several rings could easily be a hindrance when wielding a sword or bow; just one ring could significantly alter the way your grip felt. Volf was in total agreement.

It seemed there was also significant demand for double-and triple-enchanted bangles and bracelets so as to reduce the number that needed to be worn. Considering that people’s lives were on the line during battle, it was a serious matter.

Looking around here and there, they slowly made their way to the back of the shop, where they found a large object enclosed in a white casing. Coming from inside it was a distinctly cold breeze.

“This is the new ice-type cooling fan I have developed. It circulates the air in the room using air crystals and cools it with ice crystals. I intend to begin selling it this summer.”

“How marvelous!” Dahlia exclaimed a little louder than she’d meant to.

It was just like the air conditioners she remembered from her previous life. The cooling fans made with water crystals and air crystals inevitably increased the room’s humidity. This was a problem for anyone working with paper or parchment. This new model would resolve that completely. Dahlia felt sure these fans would soon be considered essential in the castle and government offices.

“So it’s powered by both air and ice crystals, is that right?”

“Precisely. They are inserted here.”

Oswald removed the front part of the white casing to reveal the inner workings.

“The pipes are beautifully crafted. These sharp curves look especially difficult to create.”

“Indeed. It took around two hundred tries before I found the ideal materials and perfected the process.”

Dahlia’s experience as a magical toolmaker told her what a challenge the construction must have been. Molding the pipes into these squashed figure-eight shapes while maintaining perfect consistency was quite a feat of craftsmanship. Oswald must have invested a great deal of time and expense into researching the materials and process. In all likelihood, Dahlia’s father could have achieved something similar if he’d set his mind to it, but this level of work was still beyond Dahlia.

“It really is fantastic. This fan will be perfect anywhere that needs low humidity. People like office workers and librarians could use it without worry.”

“Thank you very much. That is exactly what I had in mind when I developed it.” Seeming to notice something, Oswald straightened himself and gave a cough. “Sir Volfred, please forgive my rudeness. I was so absorbed in conversation with Miss Dahlia that I quite forgot my manners.”

The young knight was standing behind them, observing them pensively.

“O-Oh, excuse us!”

“Not to worry. Please, take all the time you like.”

The smile Volf gave as he replied didn’t quite reach his golden eyes. If they’d been in a weapon shop, it would have been a different matter, but this was a magical *tool* shop—perhaps he was getting bored.

“Would you perhaps like to view the support accessories you ordered on your last visit, Sir Volfred?”

“I would; thank you.”

The accessories Volf had requested turned out to be a pair of chain anklets. Both were doubly enchanted. One prevented poisoning and anemia; the other, petrification and confusion. When Dahlia asked why he’d chosen anklets in particular, he explained in a roundabout way that a knight was much less likely to lose his legs than his arms in battle. It was a grim but well-reasoned answer.

Oswald called for a male shop assistant who appeared in the same black suit and white gloves the owner wore. After a little discussion, Volf and the assistant agreed to go through to another room to adjust the sizes of the new accessories.

“I won’t be long, Miss Dahlia,” said Volf before leaving for the second floor.

As Dahlia resumed her little tour of the shop, Oswald approached her.

“Miss Dahlia, please use this upon your next visit.”

His gloved hands offered Dahlia a small gold card. It was delicately engraved with the shop’s name and a statue of a goddess.

“Er, may I ask what this is?”

“With this card, you may visit the shop anytime you wish. Even if Sir Volfred is

not with you or I am not here, you will be free to come inside and view the products as often as you like.”

She hadn’t even purchased anything. They may have been fellow magical toolmakers, but they were far apart in age and experience, and they’d never even met until today. She couldn’t understand why he would give her this card. Seeing her puzzled expression, Oswald reached up and smoothed his dark-gray hair.

“I owe a debt of gratitude to your father, you see. When I told him I wished to thank him for his kindness, he said to me: ‘If my daughter ever comes to visit your shop, show her your magical tools. If she doesn’t, then keep this secret till you die.’ I made this card in anticipation of this day.”

“Father...”

“I was so very pleased to see you today. When my time comes at last, I can look Carlo in the eye and tell him the debt is settled.”

“Um, may I ask what it was my father did for you?”

The man took a deep breath and cast his gaze down.

“It is rather embarrassing, but when I was young, my wife ran away with one of my employees and a great deal of our money. Just when I was trying to decide whether to close down the shop, put myself in deep debt, or simply end it all, Carlo appeared and took me to drink with him at a street stall.”

“I-I see...”

She’d have been better off not asking. She didn’t have a clue what to say or what sort of expression she was supposed to have.

“It was my first time drinking at a stall like that. We had a grand old time, each with a mug of ale in our hand. I opened up and told Carlo the whole sorry tale. Then, I got a stern lecture. ‘At times like these,’ he said, ‘you just find yourself a *new* woman.’ He boasted that he had the most darling young lady in the world at home.”

Father! What on earth had he been thinking? Carlo’s wife had left him alone just like Oswald’s, so she understood why he’d want to console the man, but

what a way to do it! She had a mind to go and give his grave a kick later on.

“After a few rounds of ale, Carlo invited me back to the Green Tower. That was where I met you, just a little girl in the arms of a maid. *You* were his ‘darling young lady.’ How I laughed.”

“I never knew.”

“Carlo said that the tower could be stuffy during the hot summers and that you often suffered from heat rash. To pay him back for the drinks, he told me to come up with some new magical tool that would help. With my mind clear again, I set to work, and that was when I invented the cooling fan. It was that invention that got my shop back on its feet once again. Without it, I would not be where I am today. I owe your father, and indeed you, my most heartfelt thanks.”

“Oh, no, I...”

She didn’t know what to say, so taken aback was she to learn of her part in the invention of the cooling fan.

“Carlo and I both became so busy with our work after that. I regret that we never had a chance to drink together again except at the barons’ dinners. If only I had known what would happen, I would not have hesitated to invite him out for an evening’s drinks. Not that I would presume Carlo considered me a close friend. I believe he only took pity on me that night.”

“Not at all! Every summer, my father used to sit in front of our cooling fan with his ale and say ‘All hail Oswald Zola!’ I’m sure that when he drank with you, it was out of friendship.”

“Did he really? In front of the fan? Ha ha...” Oswald chuckled, but his laughter soon faltered. He removed his glasses and pressed a handkerchief to his eyes before speaking again. “Please excuse me. I must thank you, Miss Dahlia. I feel a great load has been lifted from my heart.”

“It was nothing. Thank *you* very much for this card. It was so nice to hear how you came to know my father.”

“I hope you will pay me another visit soon. I would be delighted to hear more about your toolmaking endeavors and your good father. Come anytime you

wish. I shall be waiting.”

“I’ll be sure to; thank you so much.”

Dahlia took Oswald’s proffered hand and shook it. His tears were gone and he beamed back at her.

“Miss Dahlia?” It was Volf, descending from the second floor. His voice sounded somehow guarded as he called out to her. “Shall we head off in a moment?”

“Yes, all right.”

She released Oswald’s hand, and they bowed to each other before she and Volf headed for the exit together.

“I very much look forward to your next visit.”

The voice of her father’s friend sounded so gentle as he happily saw them off.

Outside, the heat had intensified. As Dahlia was about to put the gold card away safely in her bag, she happened to turn it over. The name “Dahlia Rossetti” was engraved on the back. Though the name was hers, those left-slanting letters were unmistakably her father’s handwriting.

Though Dahlia had always respected her father as a craftsman, he’d been one to do things at his own pace and was sometimes careless and untidy in his ways. He would drink as he experimented with his tools in the workshop and sometimes fell asleep. “I wasn’t sleeping!” he’d always insist when she came and woke him, urging him to go to bed. He’d often eat his meals while looking through books and documents, then get in a flap when he inevitably spilled something on them. Dahlia would polish his shoes and lay them out nicely, only for him to forget and go out in a pair of dirty ones. She reminded him time and again to put his coat on the hanger when he came in, only to find it slung over the back of his chair in the workshop. She told him over and over: “Don’t drink too much,” “Don’t put so much salt on your food.” Why now, when he was already gone, was she finding out what a wonderful person he’d really been? It wasn’t fair.

“Dahlia, what’s happened? Did Oswald say something rude to you?” Volf asked urgently, tightly holding her upper arms.

It was only then that she became aware of the tears sliding down her cheeks.

“No, it’s not that... I’m so sorry, I just... I was just thinking of my father.”

“Oh, I see.”

Volf put his coat around Dahlia and stood in front of her to shield her from any onlookers. In spite of the sun’s heat, the coat just felt comfortably warm.

“Take your time,” he said. “We’ll go when you’re ready.”

Dahlia caught a pleasant smell—it was Volf’s scent, lingering on the coat.

Once Dahlia had gathered herself, Volf took her to a nearby café. He explained to a waitress that she’d gotten a little dust in her eyes, and she was shown to the ladies’ restroom. It was obviously furnished to be fit for noblewomen, complete with a vanity. Here, Dahlia washed her face and reapplied her makeup.

“I’m awfully sorry about that,” she said to Volf as she emerged.

“Don’t worry about it.”

She found two cups of tea already waiting for them on the table. Volf had placed his anti-eavesdropper down too.

“Are you okay now?”

“I’m fine. Look, about earlier...”

To put Volf’s mind at ease, she decided to explain what had occurred between her and Oswald. She glossed over several details to save the man’s blushes—she wasn’t about to tell Volf how Oswald’s wife had run away and how he’d spilled the story to Dahlia’s father at a street stall. She simply explained that her father had helped Oswald come up with an important new invention during a difficult time. She’d only been a little girl then, and her father had asked Oswald to give her the card one day in exchange for his help.

When she finished, Volf visibly relaxed and let out a deep sigh of relief.

“So that’s all it was.”

“Yes. I never imagined I’d hear a story like that today. The name on the card is in my father’s handwriting. That was what shocked me...even though it’s been a

year already.”

“*Only* a year. It’s not so long.”

He offered her her tea, and they each finally took a sip from their cups. Its smooth, mellow flavor could only have been brewed from high-quality leaves, but the tea was stone cold already.

“I feel bad for asking after what you just told me, but...if possible, will you let me come with you when you go back to that shop?”

“If I did something wrong there or embarrassed you somehow, please tell me. I won’t be hurt,” Dahlia said quickly. She thought about the way he’d behaved while they were in the shop and was worried she’d inconvenienced him somehow.

“Oh, no, it was nothing to do with me exactly. You two just seemed to hit it off so well, and I couldn’t help noticing the way Oswald looked at you... Your father might’ve been cursing me from beyond; I’m the one responsible for introducing you, after all.”

She’d never heard Volf pussyfoot around so much before. His slender, shapely lips ceased to move as he searched for the words he wanted.

“Please, Volf, get to the point. There’s no need to mince words.”

“So, Oswald’s second wife was just a little older than you. His third was about your age. I’m just concerned that he might seduce you into becoming number four.”

“He will not!”

It seemed Oswald had taken her father’s advice about women to heart—perhaps a little more so than intended. Dahlia solemnly promised that she would only visit The Goddess’s Right Eye with Volf at her side.

There was one secret about Oswald that Dahlia would never learn—the reason her father Carlo had never invited him back to the Green Tower. “When Dahlia grows up,” Oswald had said after a few too many drinks, “let me marry her.”



“It’s about time for lunch,” Volf said as they exited the café. “What are you in the mood for?”

Dahlia thought about it. There *were* certain things she was in the mood to eat and drink; the question was whether they were appropriate for a single young lady and what Volf would think of them. But Dahlia soon swept away such concerns. She’d promised herself that she was going to eat and drink whatever she liked from now on. If Volf objected, well, she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

“What do you say we head the Central District and get a couple of ales from a stall?”

“Sounds perfect. Weather’s good; I’m all for it!”

Volf nodded with an enthusiastic smile. They took a carriage back to the city center and made their way to a nearby park. Around the outside of the park, a large number of street stalls plied their trade from afternoon to dinnertime. Many families in the royal capital regularly purchased their lunch or dinner from these stalls; sunny days like this must have been especially profitable for them. Each one had a banner proudly advertising the food or other goods it had for sale. The tall flags fluttered merrily in the breeze, a festive and colorful mixture of red, white, blue, yellow, green, and purple.

There was ale, wine, and fruit juice, various breads, sliced fruit, meat skewers, seafood skewers, crêpe-like dishes, sausages, salami, and grated cheese, to name just a few of the offerings. Some stalls even sold big mixed platters of everything. It wasn’t all food, though—some vendors sold cheap accessories, handkerchiefs, scented sachets, and other sundries.

It was barely noon, so the area wasn’t too crowded yet, though a reasonable number of early customers had gathered. Many of them appeared to be foreign tourists; now and then, Dahlia saw groups pass by in exotic dress. Birds warbled among the branches of the park’s verdant trees, people chattered, and the stall owners hawked their wares. Through the jumble of sounds wafted enticing smells of cooking and the sweet fragrance of fruits. The breeze felt almost hot.

“Volf, do you like porchetta? Have you had it before?”

“Never from a stall. It smells great.”

“Right, I’ll get us a couple of plates.”

“Okay, then I’ll get the ales.”

The porchetta sold at these stalls had been her father’s favorite food. It was made by completely deboning a medium-sized pig, stuffing it with various vegetables and herbs, and roasting it whole. At the stalls, it was served in thin slices, much like ham or char siu pork. The usual portion was two slices. The surface was roasted to a deep brown, while the pale pink meat inside was moist and tender. That contrast in colors was so enticing.

Dahlia had only eaten it twice in her previous life, at an Italian restaurant, but she fancied that the porchetta sold at the stalls here was more strongly seasoned than the dish she remembered. When she’d first tried it, she’d imagined it would be somewhat dry like char siu, but once she was used to it, she found it paired well with bread and drinks. Each stall owner had their own stuffing recipe and preferred herbs, making it quite fun to buy from different ones and compare.

While Dahlia purchased the porchetta, Volf fetched them each a pale ale. He appeared with two brimming mugs in the biggest available size.

“Dahlia, do you like crespelles?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Great, I’ll get us a couple.”

Crespelles were like a slightly thicker version of a crêpe filled with stir-fried vegetables and meat or seafood. The filling was usually generously drizzled with sauce and then wrapped in a square parcel. You could have it seasoned with salt and pepper or condiments like ketchup and fish sauce; there were lots of combinations to try.

“I’ll have a meat and vegetable one with salt and pepper. How about you?”

“Seafood with fish sauce, please.”

After taking payment, the vendor heaped the fillings into freshly cooked crespelles and wrapped them up. The smell of the piping-hot meat and seafood combined with the slightly scorched aroma of the sauce was absolutely

mouthwatering. There were some empty tables near the stalls, but they were in full sun, so Dahlia and Volf instead walked into the park and found a shady picnic bench beneath the trees. There, Volf at last removed his coat. The back of his white shirt was terribly damp with sweat. As Dahlia placed her food and ale down on the bench, Volf took out an anti-poisoning ring from his breast pocket.

“I’m sorry to ask you this, but would you mind putting this on when we eat together? Someone could try to poison me and get you instead. I’m not saying it’s likely, but just in case.”

“Don’t you need one too?”

“I’m all right. I’ve built up a tolerance to most poisonous foods, and I wear an anklet as well.”

He spoke about it quite casually, but it was a rather frightening subject. Dahlia was reminded that the man sitting across from her came from a whole other echelon of society.

“I see. Thank you. I’ll put it on.”

“Feel free to study it if you’re interested in the enchantment. I can always buy another if it breaks.”

When she heard that, Dahlia couldn’t help wondering if the bit about poisoning hadn’t just been an excuse to gift her the ring for research purposes. After all, if he really were likely to be targeted like that, he wouldn’t casually walk around the city on his own—his family would surely afford him an escort. Anyway, if they ended up drifting apart, she would simply return the ring to him or send it in an envelope to the castle barracks.

As she took the ring, Dahlia tilted her head quizzically.

“Hmm. Which finger do you usually put these on?”

“Either your index, middle, or ring finger on your non-dominant hand.”

“Is it difficult to hold your sword properly if it’s on your dominant hand?”

“There is that. You also have a higher chance of losing that hand in battle.”

Well, that’s a terrifying thought. Dahlia gazed down at the fingers of her left

hand and slid the gold ring onto the middle one. The ring had a degree of adjustability, allowing her to get a nice fit.

“That reminds me: the alchemist in the castle often wears his ring on his left middle finger. Do magical toolmakers do the same, then?”

“I don’t think we all do it, necessarily. In fact, my father taught me never to wear enchanted accessories while working. He said even a small amount of magic could affect the finished product.”

“Right. Guess it’s just personal preference, then.”

After chatting a little longer, they finally raised their glasses of pale ale in a toast. The ale had lost its chill somewhat, but it was refreshingly fizzy with a slightly sweet flavor and aroma of orange peel. It was the ideal beverage for quenching a dry throat. The ale was served in wooden mugs; the mug and drink were bought together, and once you were finished, the mug could be returned for a halfpenny refund. It was an effective recycling system.

“This porchetta’s delicious. I think I like it better than what I’ve had in restaurants.”

Volf was eagerly wolfing down his porchetta and getting through his ale just as quickly. It seemed he had a liking for salty and spicy foods.

“I’m glad. It was my father’s favorite, so I got into the habit of eating it too. I almost cried the first time I had it, though. I was only little.”

“Was it a spicy one?”

“No, it was just that they had the whole freshly roasted carcass there; head, feet, and all.”

“Ah, I can see why that would scare a little kid.”

It had indeed been quite a shock to the young Dahlia. She’d still been very small then; the whole pig hanging up in the stall had looked monstrous to her. However, once she’d shut her teary eyes and bravely taken a bite, she was soon won over by the delicious flavor.

Dahlia put down her ale and picked up her seafood and fish sauce crespelle. Turning away from Volf for a moment, she opened her mouth wide and took a

great big bite. A burst of sweet and savory seafood flavors filled her mouth instantly, the taste of the fish sauce coming through a moment or two later. There was no unpleasant fishiness in the aroma; on the contrary, it was wonderfully fragrant. The edges of the crespelle wrapping were crispy with a salty tang; it would be good enough to eat even on its own.

“These are great too, huh?” Volf commented, looking pleased.

“They certainly are.”

Even in this sweltering weather, a light lunch and a mug of ale out in the fresh air was hard to beat. Dahlia couldn't think of any time in the last year when she'd enjoyed such a pleasant, relaxing meal. Now that she thought of it, Tobias hadn't much cared for the likes of street stalls or picnics. Without even realizing it, she'd given up nearly everything she enjoyed for him, without asking him to change in any way at all. Rather, part of her had wished he would somehow read her mind and realize what she wanted from him...and what she wanted for herself. Looking back, she felt disgusted with herself. That fleeting dream she'd had of marrying Tobias and creating a happy home only made her shudder now.

“Halfpenny for your thoughts?”

Lost in thought, she'd been sitting there motionless. She pushed away the gloomy memories.

“I was just thinking how lovely this is, sitting in the park on a beautiful day with ale and street food.”

“Couldn't agree more. The question I'm wrestling with now is whether a mug of ruby ale would make it even lovelier.”

“There's a good idea; I'd like one too. I'll go and buy them.”

“Oh no, I'll go.”

Volf made to get up, but Dahlia quickly explained that she wanted to have a look at some of the other stalls too. Somehow or other, she managed to sit him back down. She couldn't bear to make him put that coat on again in this heat.

“I won't be long!”

Tucking her handbag under her arm, Dahlia trotted off toward the lively stalls.



There were plenty of stalls serving pale and dark ale, but Dahlia couldn't see ruby ale advertised anywhere, so her search took her a little farther away than intended. When she finally found one, someone was already being served there, so she stepped into a line a few paces back.

"Hey, miss!"

A man nearby called out to an acquaintance, she presumed, glancing over toward the other stalls, until a hand suddenly clapped her on the shoulder. She turned around in the direction of the road to see a man with blue eyes and red hair just like hers grinning at her. She had never seen him before in her life.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you."

"Can I help you?" she asked plainly, assuming he wanted directions or something.

"You here alone?"

"No, I have company."

"A girl?"

"No, a man..."

"Psh, what kind of man sends his girl out to buy the drinks? Why don't you ditch him and come have lunch with me? My treat."

"No, thank you. If you'll excuse me, I don't wish to keep him waiting."

She assumed that would be the end of the conversation, approaching the stall to order the ruby ales, when the man suddenly grabbed her wrist in a tight, slightly painful grip.

"Look, I can't help thinking it's fate, us meeting here like this. You *sure* we can't take some time to get to know each other?"

"Yes, sir, I'm very sure. You're hurting me, so please let go of my hand. If you don't, I'll have to defend myself."

His hand still clenched around her wrist, the man leaned in to murmur in her ear.

“I’d love to see you try. Sounds adorable.”

The tickle of his warm breath against her ear, reeking of alcohol, made her shudder.

“C’mon, just put your hand in mine and we’ll give that loser the slip.”

He tugged on her wrist, trying to pull her into his chest. She managed to dig her high heels into the ground and resist, but she dropped the empty mugs in her hand and her handbag slipped from under her arm. Dahlia held her breath and, with her right hand, she clutched the bangle around her wrist and swung it down toward the ground.

There was a loud *shunk!* and in an instant, a pure-white pillar of ice shot up between Dahlia and the red-haired man. The man stumbled backward in shock, falling on his backside.

“Godsdamned mages!” was all he hissed before scrambling to his feet and making a run for it.

“Magical toolmaker, actually,” Dahlia muttered after him.

She was relieved that no one had come to harm. Lying on the ground before her, having toppled over, was a pillar of ice around fifteen centimeters in diameter and eighty centimeters in length. Her modified freezing bangle had served her well.

“I’m very sorry about that!”

Dahlia bowed her head to the woman running the stall in front of her.

“Oh, no, dear, don’t be! You were fantastic! It’s me who should apologize; I should’ve sent that fool packing myself,” the elderly woman replied, waving her hands. “And where were you, young fella?”

Dahlia turned to see Volf, his black coat around his shoulders, picking her handbag up off the ground. He must have wondered what was taking so long and become worried.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t come sooner. I never should have left you to go alone...”

“It’s all right! Look, I’m fine!”

Dahlia couldn't stand to see the young knight look like that—like a dog with dolefully drooping ears.

"I'll, um, just move this ice out of the way," she said.

"Leave it there," the kindly vendor told her. "I can step around it. It'll soon melt away in the sunshine anyway, and I wouldn't want you dirtying your nice clothes."

"A-All right, that's very kind of you."

"Wait there a moment, dear."

The woman shuffled away into the back of her stall for a moment, reappearing with two freshly poured mugs of ruby ale in the largest size.

"There we go—these are on the house."

"Oh no, I couldn't..."

"They're free samples especially for you two. If you like 'em, come on back with your boyfriend and buy some more, eh?"

"That's so kind; thank you. I'll be sure to come again with my friend."

"Ah, your *friend*?" She turned to Volf with a sympathetic smile. "Good luck, young fella."

What she was wishing him luck for was a mystery to Dahlia.

It was only as she reached out to take the mugs that she became aware of the trembling of her hands and the rapid pounding of her heart. That was the moment she learned that some types of fear took time to set in.

"Sorry Volf, could you take these?"

"Of course. I'm so sorry about this."

Volf noticed her sudden shakiness, his air of gloom growing heavier. They walked back to the park side by side.

"I'm truly sorry, Dahlia. I should've insisted on going. How can I call myself a knight when I wasn't even there to protect you?"

"Please, don't let it bother you. It was just a bit of bad luck. Besides, I'm

perfectly fine.”

“Of course you’re not. How could I let someone frighten you like that? I should’ve known someone might try to hit on you.”

“I never even considered it. No one’s ever done that to me before.”

“What? You mean...*never*?”

Dahlia couldn’t help giggling at Volf’s expression of utter disbelief. She was telling the truth; that had been the first time in *both* her lives that someone had tried to chat her up.

“Nope, never. Not once. That was the first time a man’s ever approached me on the street. Isn’t makeup amazing?”

“Wait, Dahlia, I approached you on the street just the other day.”

“Huh? Oh, but that was different. You were looking for me, not trying to hit on me, right?”

“I suppose so...”

“Anyway, let’s drink these ales while they’re nice and cold.”

They returned to the picnic bench in the park, where they toasted each other and finally relaxed once again. The ruby ale was deliciously fruity. It had held its chill even better than expected and went down very smoothly.

“Was that the freezing bangle you used earlier?”

“That’s right. I modified it myself. I tried angling it down so it didn’t hit him, but it’s quite difficult to aim.”

“He deserved to get frozen solid.”

“I could hardly have called the guards on him just for grabbing my hand, though... You know, I bet if you could adjust the ice magic in just the right way, you could improvise some kind of ice sword.”

“You could put that on a sword?”

Just as planned, Dahlia had triggered off Volf’s magical sword complex. Hoping to brighten his mood, she pressed on.

“I’m not sure exactly how you’d go about adjusting it on a sword, but I don’t see why a simple freezing enchantment wouldn’t work. Though with my level of magic, I’m afraid all you’d get is a sword that stays cold for a long time.”

“Might be nice to lay my head on at night during summer expeditions.”

“Volf, the freezing enchantment would go on the blade. Sleep on that and you’ll lose your head.”

“And then my sins would be atoned for, and I would rest in peace forevermore...”

“Not on my watch!”

She had either better get used to shouting at him like this or give up on it altogether. Somehow their conversations always ended up straying in some strange direction.

Once their mugs of ruby ale were finally empty, Volf asked, “I want to drop into a weapon shop and pick up a shortsword on the way back; would you like to wait in a café nearby? Or is there some other shop you’d like to visit?”

“Is there some reason I can’t go with you?”

“You don’t mind going to a weapon shop?”

“Not at all. I’ve always wanted to take a peek inside one. Father never allowed me to, you see.”

“That’s surprising. From what I’ve heard of your father, I thought he’d encourage you to go and take notes.”

“He always said I’d go into a daze and end up cutting my hand off or something.”

“Well, I guess weapons are made to be dangerous after all. Plus, it’s mostly men in those shops. I can see why he’d be concerned.”

“It was partly my fault too; I realize that now.”

Dahlia stared at the trees across the park with a faraway gaze. The green of the fresh leaves was almost dazzlingly vivid at this time of year.

“When I was in college, I said to him, ‘I’m old enough to go to a weapon shop

on my own now!’ The very next day, I burned my hands on slime. After that, he absolutely forbade me from ever going to a weapon shop alone, and I promised I wouldn’t.”

“Burned on a slime? Ah, when you were developing your waterproof cloth?”

“Yes. I’d powdered each kind of slime, and I was trying them out with different combinations and proportions of chemicals. It was the morning after an all-nighter; I was half-asleep, to be honest. I should have been using a glass spatula, but instead, I just put gloves on and mixed the slime with my hands.”

“Slimes have acid strong enough to turn people and animals into soup...”

“Right. And whatever I’d mixed this one with only enhanced it. It turned highly corrosive and ate right through my gloves, but that was only the start. The slime I was working with was black slime—unlike blue slime, it doesn’t lose its paralyzing properties when powdered. My hands went completely numb and I couldn’t move them. I couldn’t feel anything at all, never mind pain.”

“I think I see where this is going...”

Volf looked down despairingly, his forehead resting in the palm of his left hand.

“I realized I couldn’t handle it on my own, so I called father and told him there was something wrong with my hands. He pulled them out of the bucket and poured a potion on them, then took me straight to the temple in a carriage. He kept my hands wrapped up in a sheet the whole time, and even at the temple, they treated me without letting me see them, so I’ve no idea how bad the burns were.”

“Dahlia, how much did they ask for the donation?”

“Um, I think it was two gold.”

“Yeah, those were no burns. If it took that much even after a potion, your fingers had probably dissolved right down to the bone.”

“Huh?”

“The temple doesn’t ask for gold unless it’s a serious injury. It’s no joke.”

“Really...?”

Dahlia was taken aback. No matter how often she'd asked her father about it, all he'd told her was that she'd sustained some nasty burns.

"Sometimes, when people are seriously hurt and see their own bones or blood, the shock alone can be enough to kill them. I'm sure that was why your father kept your hands wrapped up. Even knights are killed by slimes now and then. Black slimes are the most dangerous of all; they're resistant to fire, water, and air magic, and they're damn near impossible to get off once they have a hold of you."

"They cling that tightly? And they're resistant to all those kinds of magic?"

"Dahlia, that's not the point I'm making."

She'd never seen Volf's golden eyes glimmer so coldly before. That stare was unbearable; she was ready to beg him to stop.

"If you got a wound like that while you were on your own, you'd struggle to even get out of the tower. You don't do dangerous things like that anymore, right?"

"No, not anymore."

That had been a proper scolding. He was quite a different person when he turned serious like that. While Dahlia sat there nodding meekly, Volf launched into a long lecture on the dangers of slimes until he suddenly put a hand up to his mouth in surprise.

"I'm sorry, Dahlia, I shouldn't be getting so worked up."

"No, it's all right. I know now not to take slimes so lightly."

If her injuries had really been that bad, it was no wonder her father had been worried sick about her. She understood now why he'd barred her from visiting weapon shops unaccompanied.

"You know, I think I get why you always look so concerned when I talk about being a Scarlet Armor. Except in my case, I start nagging."

It was a moment of self-reflection and mutual understanding for the both of them—but that wasn't to say it felt bad.



With the shop finally empty of customers, Flores stroked his white beard as he contemplated taking his lunch break. It was then that the doorbell rang once again. The door swung open somewhat slower than usual and stayed held there. Through the doorway appeared a young woman who could hardly have looked more out of place in a weapon shop. Behind her followed the one who'd been holding the door, a tall young man with dark hair. Not many of his customers had the fine manners to hold open the old oak door to let a lady go ahead. Did he have an esteemed noble on his doorstep?

I'm not running a curiosity shop for you lovebirds to amuse yourselves in, Flores wanted to say. But he put his inner grumbling aside and greeted the pair in the manner expected of a shopkeeper.

"Welcome."

They politely returned the greeting. To his surprise, he recognized that young man with looks most women only saw in their dreams—he'd visited before. With this black hair and golden eyes, he brought to mind the panthers of the southern grasslands. In Flores's opinion, the lad could do with putting on some muscle, though. At his height, he ought to be capable of handling a greatsword.

The young woman, he assumed, was just tagging along. She had strikingly red hair and a fairly pretty face that was nicely made up. The cool tones of her outfit, a pale blue top and deep-blue skirt, contrasted her fiery hair. It was an eye-catching style. Flores found her especially elegant to look at from behind.

The pair made their way around the shop, inspecting the wares. Every time something caught the woman's emerald eyes, the man would instantly scan all around her for dangers. Flores couldn't help a silent chuckle to himself as he watched; the man was clearly determined not to let her get a single scratch. He looked like a knight guarding a precious princess.

After a few minutes, they came up to the counter. Flores fully expected it was the young man who had something to buy, but instead, it was the red-haired woman who gave him a small bow and spoke.

"I apologize for interrupting your work. I'm looking for a shortsword suitable for enchanting; a reasonably priced one that can be disassembled, ideally. Might you have such a thing?"

“Er, sure. I’ll go get you some.”

His voice came out a little high-pitched. He wasn’t used to such polite manners. The majority of Flores’s customers were adventurers; men and women alike tended to be rough-spoken and didn’t bother much with niceties. Customers like this young woman were few and far between.

He laid three shortswords upon a table for her to look at. Her green eyes lit up, almost sparkling, as she eagerly leaned in to examine them. For some reason, he was reminded of the expression his cat made whenever he gave it a new toy.

“You can go ahead and draw ’em,” he said.

The woman reached out to do so but stopped short of touching the swords. She glanced to her right. Wondering what the matter was, Flores followed her gaze and saw the tall man beside her looking at her with intense worry. It all seemed rather peculiar; she wasn’t a child after all, and no one would cut themselves all that easily on shortswords like these. She had to be a noblewoman traveling incognito or perhaps just amusing herself; only that would explain why the man was so overprotective. Nonetheless, the woman soon reached out and carefully drew each blade in turn. They were only cheap shortswords, yet she handled them as though each one were a priceless treasure. It was a strange sight to the shopkeeper.

“Do you know the origin of the iron used to forge these?” she suddenly asked, taking Flores by surprise.

As the owner of a weapon shop, he was, of course, always happy to discuss his wares. But the kinds of questions this woman had about the raw materials and assembly of these swords wouldn’t come from any ordinary young lady. Looking closely, he now noticed that her nails were trimmed short and her fingers somewhat chapped. He remembered her mentioning enchanting when she’d first approached him and decided to inquire.

“You wouldn’t happen to be a mage, would you? Or an alchemist?”

“No, I’m a magical toolmaker,” she replied with a smile.

Even the man behind her had a small smile on his lips. Magical toolmakers

were often placed one rung below mages and alchemists, but these two at least seemed to consider it a worthy occupation. *And why not?* he thought.

“I’d like two of this type, please. Is it possible to buy hilts, guards, and scabbards separately?”

“Sure you can.”

The sword the woman chose after much deliberation was the shortest of the three with a red hilt. What was it with women and choosing the cheapest possible blades without so much as a maker’s mark? Her companion tried to recommend one of the more expensive ones to her, but she stood firm.

“I’ve got other shortswords you could enchant—the kind where the hilt attaches with screws,” Flores said.

The young woman was keen to see those too, so he brought three out from the back. Once again, she began peppering him with questions about the materials and the screws; he answered them all as best he could. Her curiosity satisfied, she smiled broadly and turned to him.

“I’ll have two of these as well, please, plus two each of the screws, hilts, guards, and scabbards.”

There wasn’t a great deal of coin in it for Flores, but he found himself oddly satisfied with the deal. He soon realized the reason. When she was questioning him—in fact, even now—she looked at him with the respectful gaze one would give a teacher or master. It was enough to make a man blush. Her companion paid the bill and looked delighted to do so. He’d never seen a man look so pleased while buying weapons chosen by a woman. Just what sort of enchantments was she going to put on these things? Who were they for? If the opportunity arose, he’d be sure to ask her.

“Come again!”

“Thank you, we will!”

With that, the pair left. Just as before, the young man held the door open for his lady companion, following once she had passed through. Somehow, Flores found it rather charming to watch this time. He didn’t know what their relationship was, but there was one thing he felt strangely sure of—someday,

that fine-featured lad would be wrapped around that woman's little finger.

Friends

Dahlia didn't know whether it was due to the stress of yesterday's encounter with Tobias, the sheer delight she'd felt in the magical tool shops, or the shock of that man trying to chat her up, but she went on a veritable shopping spree on the way home. Piled in front of her was one bag containing the four swords and fittings from the weapon shop, two boxes of food, and a case containing half a dozen bottles each of red and white wine. And of course, there was the man who'd carried it all as though it were light as a feather. Not to imply that she'd bought *him*, of course.

She'd intended to buy all of this herself and let Volf carry it, but in order to assuage his guilt at not being able to help her when she was harassed at the park, he insisted on paying for it all and wouldn't listen to any of her protests. Her final resort had been to question whether this was proper behavior for the son of an earl, only for him to reply that if that was her concern, she should give him this opportunity to restore his honor. That was when she'd had to admit defeat, outsmarted. Volf had kept his hood up the whole time, sweat glistening on his brow as he hauled the goods. Dahlia was immensely grateful to him.

"Do you want me to take it inside? Or just leave it in the entrance?" the young knight asked as they stood just outside the door of the Green Tower. The sky behind it would soon be turning golden with the sunset.

Dahlia's old self would have had him leave the goods in the entrance and happily bid him farewell, drawing their day to a close. That would be the safest thing, the *proper* thing to do. However, it wasn't what she *wanted* to do. The least she could do was give him a drink, and she wanted more time to talk, just the two of them. Dahlia had no interest in romance anymore, but she did want to be his friend. That said, she couldn't ignore the small chance that Volf was not as trustworthy as she'd assumed. She was well aware that she had to be careful; one wrong move could get her a reputation around town as an "easy woman." Even so, she felt confident in her decision.

“My living room’s on the second floor; do you think you could take it up there?”

“No problem.”

Volf jogged up the stairs as though completely unburdened by the bags and boxes. Dahlia opened the door for him and turned up the brightness of the magical lantern inside.

“Do you, er, have any family or servants living with you?”

“No, I live alone.”

“I appreciate you inviting me inside, Dahlia, but you do understand it’s not safe for a single woman to bring a man into her house, right?”

“Of course I do! I don’t let just anyone in here, you know. It was either this or carry all these things up here on my own. Besides, aren’t you at least a tiny bit happy that there’s no one else here?” she retorted, making a point of blaming the situation on the merchandise.

After all, what gorgeous butterfly with a whole meadow of flowers to flutter in would choose to alight on some wilting grass by the roadside?

“Well, to be honest, yes. It means we can talk as long as we like without being interrupted. If you don’t feel safe, you can tie my hands and feet and leave me on the floor. You can sit in a chair while I’ll be down on the floor; I can look up at you as we chat.”

“I’m not going to treat you like some bandit!” Dahlia replied, dismayed. How could they possibly talk like that?

“All right, then you can stay in the tower, I’ll stand outside, and we can talk through the window. How about that?”

“I can’t yell at you all night long! I’ll lose my voice!”

She was already shouting as it was. She’d spent all that time fretting and agonizing over whether to bring him into the tower—she wanted to grab a megaphone and yell into Volf’s ear to give her that time back! Volf, meanwhile, just stood there with that silly, unbecoming grin, like a little boy who’d pulled off a prank.

“Look, I’m going to put the kettle on, so please just sit down. Unless you’d prefer white wine?”

“If it’s all the same, I would love some wine, actually...”

“I’ll fix us a little something to eat too.”

“That’s really kind of you, thank you.”

Volf sounded terribly apologetic, but they hadn’t eaten since they got their lunch from the street stalls, after all, and he’d carried the heavy wares all the way here. Anyone would be peckish after that.

For the moment, she had him take a seat on the living room sofa. She fetched him a damp towel and placed some white wine and crackers on the table, then left him to wipe away his sweat and take a few minutes’ rest while she headed to the kitchen.

She took the newly bought loaf of white bread, plus some rye bread, sausages, and other ingredients from her larder. She sliced up some vegetables into small pieces and tossed them into a small pot to boil along with the sausages. In another pot, she tossed two kinds of cheese, a splash of white wine, and a sprinkle of black pepper and grated nutmeg. Once the vegetables were cooked, she plated them along with the sliced bread and sausages, then carried everything to the living room.

She called Volf to come sit at the table. In the middle of the table sat Dahlia’s magical stove, and upon it, the small pot filled with gooey melted cheese.

Ever since she’d perfected her compact magical stove, Dahlia had been itching to make cheese fondue. This little stove made it so easy to prepare.

“Is this a cheese soup?”

Volf was looking at the pot with a thoroughly perplexed expression. He’d clearly never encountered cheese fondue before. Now that she thought of it, while she’d seen dishes served with a *topping* of melted cheese here in the royal capital, Dahlia had yet to come across cheese being used as a dip. It was possible she’d just created this world’s very first fondue.

“It is cheese, but it’s not a soup. More like a sauce, I suppose. You dip the

bread and vegetables into it.”

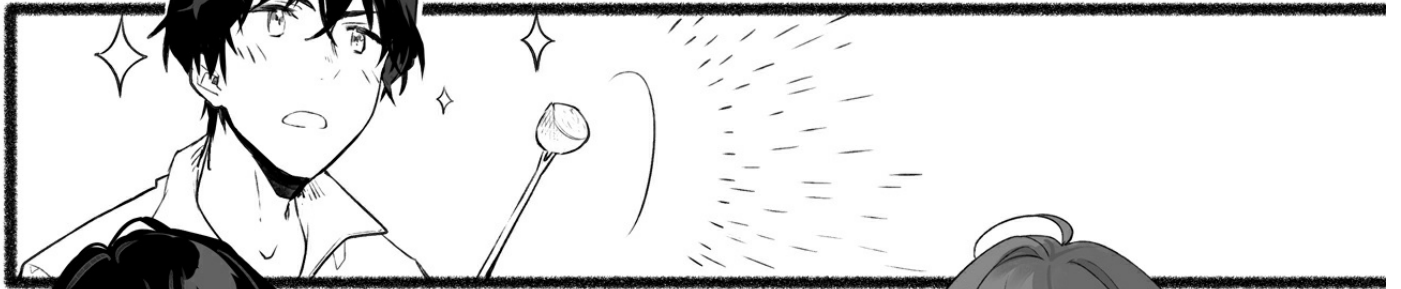
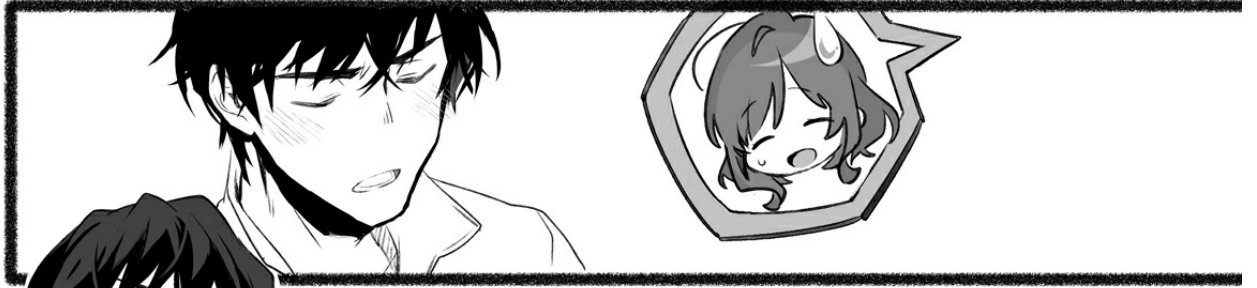
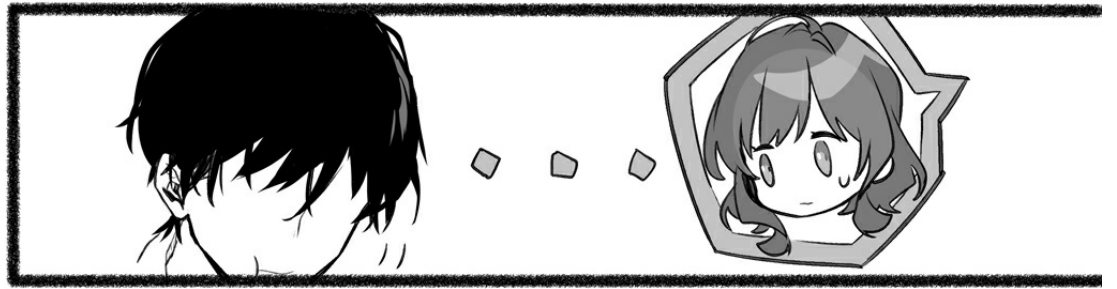
She handed Volf a long skewer and a plate before giving him a demonstration. She tried it out with a piece of bread first—it was excellent. Her usual red wine would pair very nicely with this indeed. Dahlia offered some bread to the increasingly wide-eyed young man.

“Here, try a small piece to begin with.”

With extreme care, Volf submerged a piece of bread into the melted cheese. He held up his plate to stop any dripping onto the table before quickly taking a bite of the cheese-smothered white bread. For several seconds, he was completely still. Then, he silently began to chew, taking far longer than was normal. Once he’d finally swallowed, he let out a satisfied sigh and eagerly skewered a second piece of bread.

“How is it?”

Dahlia knew he liked white wine, cheese, and strong flavors.



Judging by how the first bite had gone down, it seemed unthinkable that he *wouldn't* like this cheese fondue, but still.

“*How* have I never heard of this before...?”

He didn't need to sigh quite so dramatically. It was cheese, not a drug. And she would *very* much appreciate it if he would open his eyes and stop making that face like he was in the throes of pure ecstasy.

“This is incredible. It's so *good*...”

“You can enjoy it by yourself or with a group of friends; I definitely recommend it. As long as you have cheese, wine, and bread, you can make it easily.”

“Where do they sell this thing underneath?”

“The compact magical stove? You can buy it from the Merchants' Guild or a magical tool shop in town.”

“You bet I will. Hold on, this isn't one of your inventions too, is it?”

“It is. This small version is, anyway; the large one already existed.”

When someone created a small version of an already existing invention, there were two possible arrangements: the original creator could receive half of the profits, or the small version could be treated as a completely new invention. It depended on when the original invention had been registered with the Merchants' Guild. If the small version was registered within seven years of the original invention's registration, the original creator would receive half of the profits. If eight or more years had passed, the small version would be considered a new invention. As it happened, the magical stove had been around for thirty years or so already, so Dahlia's compact version was an example of the latter case.

“It'd be great if I could take this on expeditions. I'd need to get permission first, though.”

“I'm sure bread's a given, but are you allowed to take wine too?”

“Yeah, we get to take a decent supply along in wineskins. We get a very *healthy* diet when we're on the move; it's pretty much just rye bread and soup

with dried vegetables and meat. There's cheese, nuts, and dried fruit for snacks. That's about it."

"I see..."

It made sense from the standpoint of what was light and easy to transport, but she could imagine a diet like that would soon get tiresome. It wasn't as though it were impossible to make cheese fondue over a campfire, but you could burn it very easily.

"Sometimes if there's a village or town nearby, we can get a good meal there. The monsters we hunt tend to be out along the border or in the mountains, though. We catch animals and monsters to eat now and then, but the best we can do is roast them with a little salt and pepper. If I had this stove and some cheese, I reckon even that bread could taste good."

Volf spoke between bites of cheesy bread and sausages. The bottle of white wine had already been drained to the last drop. Glancing down at the plate, however, Dahlia saw that he had not been greedy—he'd taken nothing from her half of the plate. If he liked it so much, though, she was happy for him to enjoy his fill.

"Please, Volf, have as much as you like. There's more where this came from. I've hardly even started on all the food you bought me today."

"That's really kind. I'll leave you a gilt silver."

"Don't be silly. If you're going to insist on that, then I'll pay you for introducing me to The Goddess's Right Eye."

"I couldn't accept that; Oswald was waiting for you, anyway."

"But I'd never have gone at all if you hadn't been with me."

"Maybe not, but still..."

Before he could say another word, Dahlia thrust a bottle of white wine into his hand.

"Open this and eat up. I'll go get us some more."

"R-Right. Thanks, Dahlia."

A few minutes later, Dahlia returned with second helpings and the pair continued their meal as the conversation turned to the soon-to-be-enchanted shortswords. When it came time to clean up, Volf was the first one to get up from the table, carrying the plates and pots through to the kitchen for her and even getting it all washed up in no time. Dahlia was quite shocked. *Must be all that time camping out in the wilds.*



By the time they'd finished their meal, night had already drawn in. The pale moon gleamed brightly outside the open window while a cool evening breeze wafted in.

"Shall I bring us another bottle?" Dahlia proposed.

"To be honest, I'm of two minds. Half of me wants to stay and chat, the other half says it's time I got out of your hair and went home," Volf replied, looking a little uneasy.

"Commoners are more or less free to keep company with who we like, when we like, but how about you?"

"I'm totally free. I've gone out with friends and stayed at the bar all night before."

As far as commoners were concerned, the royal capital was very permissive in terms of love and relationships. Many households allowed lovers and fiancés to go traveling together. Some couples lived together before marrying, and some raised a family without ever formally registering their marriage. Others enjoyed romance and friendship while staying single all their lives. Affairs, divorces, remarriages and dramatic lovers' quarrels were all part of daily life.

"Er, I..."

"So, um..."

They both broke the awkward silence at the same time, only to let it fall again. After a few seconds, it was Volf who again volunteered to revive the conversation.

"So...at the risk of sounding *incredibly* rude here, I have to ask you something. Are you expecting me to make a move? In *that* sense, I mean."

“Not at all,” Dahlia answered immediately. She looked Volf in the eye and asked him a question in turn. “Are you expecting me to flirt with you?”

“No. I’m really, truly sorry I had to ask that question at all. I knew that wasn’t what you were after. I just couldn’t convince myself that a woman would invite me into her home without any other intentions.”

“I apologize too. I knew you were an honorable man, but I did consider that I might be putting myself in danger.”

The pair found themselves bowing to each other in apology. It would have been a funny sight to anyone looking in.

“Don’t get me wrong; I think you’re a very attractive woman, Dahlia. You’re pretty, you’re smart, you’re fun to talk to...” Volf paused there, touching the back of his hand to his lips for a moment. Then, switching tack, he continued, “I assume I’m right in saying I’m not your type at all, anyway? I mean, I really took advantage of your kindness the first time we met, then today I sent you off alone to buy our drinks, I couldn’t protect you from that pest, and now I’m sponging a meal off of you... I’ve been a pretty weak excuse for a man.”

“I don’t think so, Volf; I find you very attractive as well. It’s not so much a matter of type with me, though. I’ve just broken off my engagement after all, and I have my work to interest me.” As she cast her mind back on everything that had happened recently, Dahlia calmly spoke her thoughts aloud. “I just can’t see myself falling in love anymore.”

“Nor can I. I’d rather spare myself the trouble.”

Having laid their thoughts bare, both Volf and Dahlia looked as though a load had been taken off their shoulders. Their gazes met and they smiled wryly at each other without a word. There was no spark of love in their eyes. Dahlia could now summon the courage to ask Volf the question that had been on her mind since they first met.

“Shall we be friends, Volf? Two friends who while away the hours talking about magical tools and swords?”

“We shall, Dahlia. I’ll drink to that!”

Volf beamed with the widest smile she’d ever seen from him. They opened a

new bottle of white wine and toasted their friendship. A second toast to magical tools and swords followed that one, only for them to crack both their glasses quite spectacularly. Volf apologized endlessly and promised he'd bring Dahlia a new pair of wine glasses the next time he visited. Sitting across from each other at the table, they each poured themselves a new glass of wine; one white, one red.

"I've finally met a woman I can talk to as a friend."

Volf reclined on the sofa opposite Dahlia. The tension that had stiffened his shoulders earlier had completely melted away. She probably looked just the same, Dahlia thought as she took up her glass.

"You make it sound as though you don't have many friends."

"You're right, I don't."

"I was only joking; I feel bad now. Is that just how it is for nobles?"

"No, it's not that. I don't particularly have trouble *making* friends, but sooner or later, we end up falling out over a woman. It was especially bad when I was in college."

"Was it, um...like a love triangle situation?"

Volf didn't answer right away. He slightly tilted his wine glass, watching the surface of the pale amber liquid as it glimmered. Then he closed his enchanting golden eyes and smiled somewhat coldly.

"The girl my friend loved wanted me instead. Friendship over."

"Everyone's still so young in college."

"My friend's girlfriend fell in love with me. Friendship over."

"I can see why that would've been hard for him."

"A girl started dating my friend only to get to me. Friendship over."

"I can't believe someone would go that far..."

"My friend's little sister confessed to me, even though she was already engaged. When I turned her down, she told my friend I was the one who'd been trying to seduce her. He believed her and came and punched me in the face."

Friendship over.”

“Just how many friends have you lost this way?”

That would be enough to traumatize anyone. From these experiences alone, it was clear that Volf’s good looks had been more of a curse to him than a blessing.

Volf finally opened his eyes again, looking rather tired as he continued.

“Toward the end, I couldn’t stand college life. I was relieved at first when I joined the knights and started living in barracks, but then I started getting all sorts of invitations for everything from marriage interviews to casual flings. I hated it. Word’s gotten around now that I’m involved with a dowager duchess, so they’re not as persistent as before.”

“A dowager duchess? Is she a relative?”

When Dahlia pictured a duchess, an image of an elegant and voluptuous beauty floated into her head. Perhaps she’d read too many novels in her previous life.

“Before she married, my mother was a knight, and she worked as a bodyguard to this duchess. I’ve stayed on her estate now and then thanks to my mother’s connections. When her husband died, there were young men buzzing around her like flies, *swarms* of them, hoping she’d take one of them under her wing. Once the rumor got out that she and I were together, that repelled most of them.”

“Swarms of them?”

Dahlia struggled to picture gentleman callers; instead, she just saw Volf sweeping up heaps of dead flies with a broom. Perhaps the wine was getting to her.

“I heard that, back when her husband was still alive, some fools carrying bunches of flowers even trespassed in the gardens, looking for her. The duke wasn’t a very forgiving man. Some of the persistent ones might’ve been *swatted*—permanently.”

“You’re joking. Please tell me that’s a joke, or I won’t be able to sleep

tonight!”

Volf offered no reply, instead smiling cheerfully as he opened a new bottle of red wine and filled their glasses to the brim.

“I guess you don’t mess with a duke... But Volf, wouldn’t you count that lady as a friend? If she’s widowed now, you could even be her lover if you wanted, couldn’t you?”

“‘Friend’ is the wrong word for it. She’s so far above me in all respects. If anything, she’s more like my adoptive aunt; she’s my mother’s age, after all. She taught me everything I needed to know about being a noble. And as for being lovers... No. I can deal with those urges at the brothel if need be.”

“I’m surprised at you, Volf, saying such things to a woman. And as casually as that.”

Rather than *spending* money in one of those places, a man with Volf’s looks would surely be able to earn it. A lot, too, in a short space of time.

“Dahlia, from the way you’re looking at me right now, I think I know exactly what you’re thinking,” the young knight said, staring back steadily at her. She quickly changed the subject.

“When you were in college, weren’t you expected to find some respectable young lady to marry?”

“I was once drugged by a so-called ‘respectable young lady’ at a college tea party.”

“At a *tea party*?”

“Mhm. Whether she planned to have me right there or take me to her place in a carriage or something, I don’t know. I was just lucky I had a friend I’d invited along. If he hadn’t found me and taken me home, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

“Gosh...”

“I got a pretty harsh lecture from him too. I wasn’t close with my family, so I didn’t know this, but most nobles start preparing themselves for that kind of thing from a young age. That friend of mine was a noble too, so he was able to

give me advice on what drugs I should start building a resistance to and what magical accessories to buy to protect myself. I was really grateful. Then there was the incident with his little sister, and he never spoke to me again.”

“You’ve really been through a lot.”

It was enough to make anyone lose their trust in women—their trust in *people*, even. Worse still, despite being one of the earl’s sons, it seemed Volf was barely considered a member of the family. It must have been incredibly hard for him when he’d had no one to turn to for advice.

“So, to be honest, my relationships have been pretty pitiful so far. It’s only since joining the Beast Hunters that I’ve made a handful of friends who I can really talk to. I’ve turned into a complete coward who’s incapable of trusting women. The only useful talent I have is slaying monsters. If I hadn’t met you as ‘Dali’ first, I don’t think I’d ever have been able to talk to you like this.”

Even while he put himself down, Volf’s demeanor betrayed the pain he clearly felt inside, his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

“Well, now you know exactly what I am. Not really the kind of man you’d want to involve yourself with, am I?”

“I disagree,” Dahlia replied, shaking her head.

After all, where was Volf to blame in all this? Just because women were drawn to him on account of his good looks, that didn’t make him responsible for their actions. *Volf* was the one who’d suffered more than anyone else.

“Besides, as far as romance goes, my life’s hardly been a perfect example either.”

“Ah... You mean your fiancé and his ‘true love’?”

It seemed as though no one around her would refer to Tobias by name lately. Well, it was preferable to hearing it over and over.

“Yes, him. Our fathers’ deaths meant our engagement drew out for a whole two years. The day before our wedding, I went to the new house we’d built together, only to find he was already keeping his new fiancée there. Her clothes and things were inside my furniture. Then, the next day, he turned up on my

doorstep, demanding his engagement bracelet back so he could give it to her.”

“I think you’ve earned the right to smack that man in the face. In fact, you ought to take a run at it and sock him with all you’ve got,” Volf declared firmly. His golden eyes were deadly serious.

“You know, I just didn’t care enough for that. Even though I’d been at his side for two years, I’d never been in love with him. Even when I was in college, love felt like this distant, vague idea that I never really understood. Now that I’m single again and have time to concentrate on my toolmaking, I’m enjoying life a lot more. After I broke off the engagement, I realized that falling in love probably just isn’t in my makeup.”

“I see...”

It seemed that Volf understood her. She was surprised at how easily she was able to explain her feelings; she’d been struggling to get her head around them until now. Perhaps she had the wine to thank for that.

“Back in college, were you majoring in magical toolmaking studies?” Volf asked.

“That’s right. I spent my days studying in the magical tool research laboratory, then when I came home, I took care of the chores and helped my father with his toolmaking. I made time for my own research too.”

“You certainly kept yourself busy.”

“I did, but whenever I had some time off, my friends and I would go out to eat, go on shopping trips, have sleepovers—that kind of thing.”

“Huh. That sounds really nice.”

Despite his fine looks, noble birth, and prestigious occupation, it seemed Volf had missed out on many of the experiences most people fondly remembered from their youth. He was looking at Dahlia with envy, and she couldn’t help but pity him.

“I think the first time I went out to town with a friend from the knights, he used me as bait to pick up girls.”

“You’re better off without friends like that.”

“He’s not a bad guy. He says things to me these days like, ‘A man needs women like he needs air to breathe’ and spends every spare coin he has on his girlfriends.”

“At least he’s doing the city’s economy some good.”

Just then, Volf suddenly glared at something across the room. He raised one hand as though to shield his eyes as he took a swig of wine. Glancing in the same direction, Dahlia noticed Volf was sitting opposite the open window. His face would have been reflecting in the glass.

“Do you dislike your own face that much?” she asked before she could stop herself. He’d shielded his eyes in the manner one protects a wound.

“I hate it.”

He smiled pleasantly as he replied, but his expression was somehow tinged with anger. He drained his glass, and his expression, too, became empty.

“When I was younger, I was once taken to the temple to see if my eyes were charmed. I wanted to be cured, but they told me there was no charm in my eyes. When I asked the priest why I was born with these eyes, he said, ‘It is surely a blessing from the gods. Those eyes of gold will draw the goodwill of those around you.’ Goodwill, right... Lust would be more like it.”

Though his face remained impassive, it felt as though he were on the verge of tears. From what he’d told Dahlia, it seemed those beautiful golden eyes were nothing more than a curse that gnawed away at him.

“If there was a way for you to hide your eyes from people, would you do it?”

“Without a doubt. That sounds like something a witch would ask, though.”

Volf looked back at her with uncertainty.

“I’m no witch, just a magical toolmaker. But it might just be possible for me to make something that could grant your wish. Why don’t you come down to the workshop with me? We can bring the wine.”

Glasses in hand, the two of them descended the stairs to Dahlia’s workshop.



Dahlia retrieved a pair of silver-rimmed protective glasses her father had sent

away for early last year. He'd never had the chance to use them. She had Volf try them on; they turned out to be the perfect size.

"I already have glasses, Dahlia. They don't have much—"

"Have you ever tried glasses with colored lenses?"

"No, never."

That was precisely what Dahlia intended to make him. Though she hadn't often seen them worn around town, they did exist. Dahlia had a ready supply of glass sheets in various colors. She chose one with a subtle blue-gray tint.

"I'll replace the lenses in these glasses with colored ones. A change in eye color can make a big difference. And one more thing..."

Dahlia reached up to a shelf and took down a small silver box. It was about five centimeters on each side, and it was sealed by magic. Inside were the powdery remains of the fairy glass Dahlia's father had once tried to make her a window out of.

"I'm going to try using fairy glass."

"Fairy glass?"

Volf cocked his head as he peered at the silver box.

"The same material used in that lamp we saw at The Silver Bough today. It's said to be a crystallized form of the magic fairies use to camouflage themselves. It has the power of concealment. I can't be sure whether it'll work, but I'm going to try using it to enchant the lenses. I'm afraid it is most likely to fail; in that case, I'll make a pair of glasses with a slightly darker tint."

"This seems like a lot of work for you."

"Just think of it as an experiment. I'm sorry if it turns out to be a failure."

This shattered fairy glass had been party to one failed experiment already. However, she'd be enchanting a far smaller surface than a window pane, so in theory, she *should* be able to manage it. She put her chances of success or failure at fifty-fifty. *No, more like forty percent for success, sixty for failure.*

"You're sure you don't mind me watching you work?"

“Not one bit. Please, just relax and enjoy your wine. Each lens should only take a few minutes. Ah, I can’t talk when I’m working, though. If the enchanting turns out to take longer than expected, I won’t mind if you leave me to it and head home.”

Dahlia pulled on her green work robe and sat down in her usual chair. Volf seated himself diagonally across from her at the workbench. Dahlia began by taking pieces of the blue-gray glass she’d selected and using her magic to mold them into shape, using the clear lenses she’d removed from the frames as a reference. Once they were ready, she carefully placed them into a tray.

Next, she carefully opened the magically sealed silver box. Inside, the shattered fairy glass shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. It was as if every minute fragment had a life of its own. She transferred the fairy glass to a crystal beaker before slowly pouring in some blue liquid. While infusing magic from her right index finger, she took a glass stirrer in her left hand and mixed the beaker’s contents.

Dahlia poured half of the mixture upon one of the lenses and strengthened the flow of magic from her fingertip. Without her touching it at all, the liquid pooling on the lens’s surface began to ripple. Dahlia used her magic to try to bring the millions of tiny, shimmering specks of fairy glass under control. She needed to take great care not to let the liquid spill over the edge; if the fairy magic affected the inner surface of the lens, the glasses would be useless.

The shattered fairy glass was just as free-spirited and unpredictable as any living fairy, the countless tiny sparkles shifting with every moment. It teased the craftswoman like an unruly child. Nonetheless, Dahlia maintained intense concentration and kept her magic flowing steadily. Eventually, the willful liquid seemed to give up the fight and gradually crept inward toward the center of the lens. The way it moved made it appear just like a minuscule, glittering, rainbow-colored slime.

There existed several methods of enchanting magical tools. The most common method was to strike the object with a powerful burst of magic, applying the enchantment in a single shot. It was quick and generally resulted in powerful enchantments. Those with potent magical abilities frequently used this technique to imbue magic crystals with power. However, strong magic was

always liable to damage or destroy the object of the enchantment. It was useless for anything requiring delicacy.

The next method involved gauging the degree of magical power required for the enchantment in advance. The enchanter would assess the object to work out how much magic would be required, after which they would carefully gauge their own magical output. Once the required degree of magic had been determined, the enchantment was applied. This method was less wasteful and well suited to mass production, making it popular among magical toolmakers. Galling as it was for Dahlia to admit, Tobias had far more aptitude for this kind of enchantment than her.

The final method involved gradually applying magic while constantly monitoring the object and materials. Though the magic required could be relatively weak, perseverance and a keen eye were essential to observe the subtle changes in the materials. This method was Dahlia's speciality, and it was the one she was currently engaged in.

"Enchanting is a conversation with your materials," her father had taught her. What was important was a steady flow of magic and constant adjustment to direct it at the spots and angles where the material *wanted* it. Whenever Dahlia brought her finger to a shimmering spot in the liquid, the other side began sparkling, as if to say "This way too!" Just keeping up with the fickle glittering was beginning to make her nauseous. Dahlia suddenly became aware of a shape forming within the multicolored light. It was the semi-translucent form of a fairy. This was her first time seeing an illusion while crafting.

She remembered something her father had once mentioned: "Sometimes, very rarely, you have a moment of understanding with the tool you're making or your materials." She hadn't understood what he'd meant at the time. Perhaps this was it.

"What is your wish?"

Dahlia couldn't discern the fairy's face, but its voice rang clearly inside her head like a little silver bell. She was disconcerted, but she replied quickly.

I want to help that man hide his eyes—to make them look ordinary.

"Why would you hide them? They are beautiful."

The voice sounded deeply puzzled. Dahlia considered the question. To say she wanted to help him out of pity sounded arrogant. What was it she really wanted? *To protect him from the gazes of the world.* She wanted him to pass unseen by those who would look at him with lust or spite—by those who would hurt him. She didn't want to see his smile fade.

Please, protect Volf from the eyes of others so that he can be happy. I don't want to see him hurt.

As soon as Dahlia conveyed her wish, the fairy laughed happily and fluttered its wings.

*"I **will** protect him! But you must send me across the rainbow."*

The rainbow? What should I do?

The fairy didn't answer, but more illusions began to run through Dahlia's mind. What she saw was this fairy's death. She saw it exhaust its power as it fled from some canine monster, its tiny body dropping to the ground. An arching rainbow shimmered before it, and it desperately tried to cross over, but with its battered body and tattered wings, the little fairy couldn't fly. Though she knew it was only an illusion, Dahlia found herself reaching out toward it.

"Ngh!"

Through her outstretched arm, Dahlia felt a sudden rush of magical power wrenched from within her body. She gritted her teeth and swallowed back the nausea and intense discomfort that welled up inside her. Sweat began to run from her temples, drops clinging briefly to her chin before splashing onto the desk.

"Dahlia! Shouldn't you rest for—"

"Quiet!" she snapped.

She focused once again on pouring her magic into the glass lens. The fairy had completely vanished. Looking like a tiny slime that had swallowed multicolored glitter, the now jelly-like droplet in the center of the lens quivered before forming a perfect sphere. The moment she began to imagine failing and shattering the lens, Dahlia suddenly felt her father's presence at her back. Of course, he wasn't really there; how could he be? She was tempted to turn

around all the same, but she quashed that temptation and trained her gaze solely on the lens.

As she stared at its surface, she saw in her mind's eye an image of her father's face, crumpling with wrinkles the way it always did when he laughed. Rays of light began to stream from the center of the little sphere of liquid, like brilliant petals. Dahlia watched as a kaleidoscopic blossom burst open upon the lens's surface, looking just like the flower that was her namesake. The moment the bloom opened fully, it shone dazzlingly bright and Dahlia instinctively closed her eyes.



When she finally opened her eyes again, all that remained in her hand was the lens. She tried applying magic to it, and as soon as she was satisfied that no more would enter, she immediately picked up the second lens. Volf was watching her, his face etched with worry, but she didn't even notice him. While her concentration was still intact, she needed to see if she could repeat what she'd just done—otherwise, she feared she'd never be able to. She'd come this far; she couldn't stand to let it be a fluke.

She never saw the fairy again as she worked on the second lens. However, that wasn't to say the work went smoothly. The droplet on the lens seemed slightly less viscous than the first, sliding about on the smooth glass. Dahlia repeated her wish as she poured her magic in, and again she felt that sensation of her power being forcefully drawn out from inside her. Perhaps because she was prepared this time, it was far less uncomfortable than before. At last, she managed to gather the droplet into the center of the lens and coax that shining, many-colored flower to bloom a second time, before it too vanished into nothingness. With that, the pair of lenses were complete. She had only to fit them into the frames and screw them in tight. The finishing touch was a spray of water and a careful wipe with a clean cloth before Dahlia finally handed the glasses to Volf.

"Here, try them on."

The young man did so, looking around the room. His vision would have a slight bluish tint, but hopefully not enough to be bothersome.

"It's good. I can see clearly; things aren't too bright."

"Try taking a look in the mirror there. I enchanted them with the fairy's concealment magic, so you should look...different."

"What the...?"

Looking back at him in the mirror, through faintly blue-gray glasses, was a green-eyed young man. Those green eyes were still Volf's, but their character was utterly different. They were softer, calmer. Perhaps most importantly, they were eyes you might see in any corner of town. A further surprise came when he turned his head and saw that even from the side, his eyes still looked just as soft and gentle, just as green as spring leaves. His face was still very much his

own, yet he could almost be someone else, so curiously inconspicuous had he become.

“You’ll have to forgive me; there’s a bit of my father’s image in those lenses.”

She hadn’t expected to be struck by that memory of her father while enchanting. As it turned out, though, the image of his gentle, slightly downturned eyes had come in handy. Whether he’d be pleased or dismayed to know his image was living on in this way, she didn’t know. She would take a drink to his grave and hope for forgiveness.

“Keep them on and brush your bangs forward, would you?”

“Hm? Oh, sure.”

The young knight was still staring in the mirror, utterly amazed. He seemed puzzled by her request but meekly obeyed, brushing his hair forward before returning his gaze to the mirror.

“Now you shouldn’t stand out too much. Your friends should still recognize you, but I don’t think your eyes will draw attention anymore. Do you, um, think you’d be able to walk around without your hood if you wore those?”

His beauty had been toned down at least a couple of levels, though there was little she could do about his glossy black hair, fine features, and tall, lean figure. She chose not to mention that, though.

“Yeah. I think I could, you know.”

One hand covered his mouth, the other clutching at his waist. His shoulders trembled; there were no tears in his eyes, so she could only assume he was laughing rather than crying. Was he that bewildered by what he saw? Though slightly concerned, Dahlia waited patiently for him to compose himself.

“Thank you, Dahlia.”

Volf bowed his head low and kept it there as he continued.

“I want to buy these from you at a fair price. I’ll pay whatever you ask.”

“No, I couldn’t charge you for a prototype. Take those, and if you need another pair, then I’ll let you buy them. Now please, raise your head!”

“Prototype or not, you made them for me. Please, you must let me pay you.”

“Honestly, I insist—that fairy glass was just a leftover from a failed experiment!”

“How much would it have cost you to make these with new materials?” Volf asked, straightening up at last.

“Erm, well, let me see...” Dahlia answered hurriedly. “The frames, glass, and processing would come to about three gilt silver. But the fairy glass... I’m afraid just one spoon of that costs about three gold. I think that amount would make two pairs of glasses. But it’s quite a rare material, you see. I’d need to find out where to get it.”

“Understood. Then I’ll pay you three gold and three gilt silver for the pair I’m wearing now.”

“No, like I said, it’s only a prototype. I’ll be happy to make you another pair, though, in case that one breaks.”

“Not that I wouldn’t appreciate that, Dahlia, but it looked hard on you. I wouldn’t want to make you push yourself like that again.”

It was strange being looked at with worry by those gentle green eyes. They were Volf’s, yet when she looked into them, she couldn’t help being reminded of her father. The odd emotion spurred her to explain her thoughts to her friend.

“You’ve got it wrong, Volf. I’m a magical toolmaker, and this is my work. The second time I make something, I’ll make it better and more easily than before. The third time will be better still.”

In all honesty, this enchantment was one of the three most difficult she’d ever done. But what did it matter? If it allowed her to create something that would protect her friend, she’d take on the challenge a thousand times. Another two or three pairs were well within her capabilities.

“It’s the same way with beast hunting, isn’t it? Even if your first hunt doesn’t go well, the next time you meet that monster, you have a better idea of its weaknesses and such, right?”

Unsure what sort of comparison would demonstrate her point best, Dahlia opted for Volf's work.

"I suppose so, but it looked painful for you..."

"If I mess up, the worst that'll happen is I'll faint. It's not life or death like beast hunting is. There's nothing to worry about, I promise."

Her magical power was almost spent for now, and her legs felt like jelly. To disguise the fact, she stood up with vigor.

"Anyway, the experiment was a success! Time for a toast, I think."

"Agreed."

Volf filled both their glasses with red wine, and for the umpteenth time that day, they clinked them together in a toast. The sweet red wine was a balm to Dahlia's dry throat. Before she knew it, she'd drained her glass.

"Oh! Volf, are you allowed to bring items like these into the castle or your barracks? I hadn't even considered it," Dahlia asked, her voice tinged with worry.

It was quite possible that magical tools like these weren't permitted around the castle. Without proper rules, people could go disguising themselves willy-nilly.

"It'll be fine. I'll need to have them inspected and registered when I enter the castle, but there shouldn't be any issue with me bringing them in. I probably just won't be allowed to wear them on the castle grounds. Your identity's always checked at the gates, anyway. High-ranking nobles use disguises all the time when they go out in town. People who've been cursed by monsters often use concealment bangles and such to hide the marks too."

"Er, should I have heard that last part?"

Volf's eyes, so reminiscent of her father's, looked puzzled as he replied to her concerned question.

"It's not only around the castle you get people with monster curses; adventurers get them from time to time too. You haven't heard of that before?"

“Never. If it’s all right to ask, what are these curses actually like?”

“Well, some people grow scales on the arm they killed the monster with, while others get marks on their body like they’ve been scorched. Some curses can be dispelled at the temple, but not all. Even when they can, it’s pretty expensive. People often wear concealment accessories while they’re saving up the money.”

“I had no idea...”

She could understand why there’d be a demand for such accessories among those afflicted by curses. The nature of these curses intrigued her—were they like a slain monster’s final vengeance? Or were they something that occurred under particular conditions?

“Weren’t you able to disguise your face with one of those concealment bangles?”

“I’ve never heard of one that can change the appearance of your eyes. There may be other glasses out there with that enchantment on them, but I’ve never seen them for sale in any magical tool shops. It’s possible that they’re in use at the Intelligence Office, I suppose.”

“Do you think you could keep quiet about me making these?”

“Of course. I promise I will. If anyone asks, I’ll say I got them through my family.”

Dahlia gazed at him steadily as he nodded. She just couldn’t shake that sense of uneasiness as she looked upon his altered face.

“I’m sorry, Volf, but could you take those off whenever we drink together here?”

“Is it a bit uncanny?”

“It’s just... I suppose it’s just because I’m reminded of father, but it’s making me feel incredibly bad about drinking too much.”

“Right. I’ll keep them off inside the tower.”

Once he’d removed the glasses, he and Dahlia raised another toast. Which number this one was was anyone’s guess. Now unobstructed, Volf’s golden

eyes seemed to glow with happiness as he gazed at the young craftswoman.

Interlude: The Chairman of Orlando & Co.

Tobias had come to the offices of Orlando & Co. to order some materials he needed for magical toolmaking. Unusually, his mother was nowhere to be seen, and the clerks were noticeably quiet.

“Tobias.”

Turning in the direction of the toneless voice, Tobias saw a man approaching him. It was his elder brother, Ireneo Orlando. He was ten years Tobias’s senior and the chairman of Orlando & Co. He was tall and slim, with dark-brown hair and dark, almond-shaped eyes—the spitting image of their father. Tobias had never felt at ease in his company.

“Welcome home, Ireneo. When did you get back?”

“The night before last. I need to speak with you; do you have time?”

“Yes, now’s fine.”

They entered one of the meeting rooms, Ireneo taking the seat farthest at the back while Tobias sat diagonally across from him. A clerk brought them each a cup of black tea, bowing before leaving the two men completely alone.

“I’ve heard about your broken engagement and all that’s transpired since.”

“I’m sorry, it all happened so suddenly. I didn’t mean to cause trouble for you.”

“In all honesty, Tobias, when I heard everything you and mother managed to get up to while I was away, all I could do was laugh.”

Ireneo dropped the thick bundle of documents he’d been carrying with a *thud*, spreading them out on the table. Now that Tobias looked properly at his brother, he could clearly see the dark circles under the man’s eyes and the prominent veins in his hands. An unmistakable air of fatigue hung over him.

“Your debt to the guild has been repaid in full. I’ve added thirty gold to your account—consider this your credit with the guild and do not touch it. *Never*

take out a loan in the company's name again; it will affect our credibility."

"I'm sorry..."

"Next is the matter of that magical tool you registered under your name. This one's a pain. I'll pull what strings I can to keep my contacts at the guild quiet about it, but there's no stopping rumors once they escape, and we can't afford to act too conspicuously. The last thing we need is Gabriella using this against us. You need to stay away from the Merchants' Guild for the time being."

"I will."

"Now, there is word circulating that you found yourself a new woman and abandoned your devoted fiancée, Dahlia, on the eve of your wedding."

"Well, I..."

Tobias faltered, unable to refute this.

"Whether it's true or not is irrelevant; unsavory rumors will affect your future and your business relationships," Ireneo continued as he leafed through some papers.

Several times, Tobias noticed Dahlia's name in scrawled writing on the documents.

"I've been investigating Dahlia's connections; it seems she's been keeping company with a man from the Scalfarotto family lately. I'll hire a few gossip-birds in due course to get the word out that she has a new man and is happily continuing her work. We'll say she would've been unhappy as a housewife. Things should settle down in a couple of months."

As the name implied, "gossip-birds" were people hired to go out into the town and mingle with the crowds with the aim of spreading rumors or creating publicity. Normally, they were employed to spread good word about certain businesses or products, but it seemed Ireneo had found an alternative use for them.

"Dahlia's seeing that man? Are you serious?"

Tobias recalled the image of that excessively fine-featured man he'd met the other day on the terrace of a café. He had indeed introduced himself with the

name Scalfarotto. For some reason, he didn't remotely like the thought of Dahlia having spent all her time with that young nobleman since that day.

"She's been seen walking with a tall, strikingly handsome young man with black hair and golden eyes. The description fits that of Earl Scalfarotto's youngest son. At a store near her tower, Dahlia's bill was paid by a tall man wearing a black hood. The same man even carried her shopping home for her. He seems to have taken quite a fancy to her," Ireneo continued, pausing to gently blow on his steaming cup of tea.

How had he managed this amount of research in only two days? Among the documents, Tobias saw the earl's name.

"With the young man's rank being what it is, I'm sure she isn't entertaining hopes of marrying him. Even so, he is one of the celebrated Scalfarottos. If nothing else, I'm sure he'll be a generous patron."

Dahlia couldn't possibly have a patron, Tobias was about to say, but he stopped short. That day, it had been that young man who had done the talking, not Dahlia.

"I swear, if only I didn't have a wife at home already, I'd marry her myself."

"It's hardly the time for jokes, Ireneo."

"I'm not joking. The woman's college-educated, mathematically minded enough to manage the accounts, a talented magical toolmaker, the daughter of a baron, and the owner of the Green Tower. What's more, she's suffered through this affair with you with admirable calm, bagged herself the son of an earl, and single-handedly founded her own trading company. Only the gods know how far you'd search to find another woman like that."

Ireneo let out a bitter sigh as he looked down at the document on the top of the pile—details of a business called the Rossetti Trading Company.

"What more could you possibly have wanted, Tobias?"

"Emilia's all I—"

The cold glare Ireneo gave him stopped him in his tracks. It was so like their father's, instantly reminding Tobias of every time he'd been harshly

reprimanded when he was younger.

“A man can’t help his taste in women; we all know that. But there are ways of doing these things. Why could you not have just waited six months before getting together with Emilia?”

“I just...needed to be with her as soon as I could.”

“Let me ask you this: if Dahlia had been the first one to find a new lover, broken the engagement with you, and then announced that she and her beau were moving into your house the next day, how would *you* have felt?”

“I...”

“Because that’s exactly what you did. Stay away from Dahlia from now on. The Scalfarottos could crush our little outfit at the drop of a hat if there were trouble,” Ireneo warned as he pulled out yet another document from the pile.

“Now, regarding Emilia, she is indeed the viscount’s daughter, but she has no useful connections of any kind.”

“No useful connections? What do you mean?”

“I did a cursory investigation. Emilia was born to the younger brother of the previous Lord Tallini and a woman who worked on the estate. The previous viscount paid a considerable sum of money and employed a scrivener to formally sever all ties with the woman. Mother wrote a letter of greeting to Lord Tallini; the reply came back only to say that they had no knowledge of any Emilia. There are commoners bearing the Tallini name, and Emilia’s mother was just that. Still, she’s gotten good use out of it, hasn’t she?”

Tobias could see the viscount’s name written on the letter in his brother’s hands. Their mother’s letter was tied to it with a brown cord. It had evidently been returned.

“I don’t care about that. She’s still Emilia.”

“If that’s what you think, all well and good. I’ll be writing an apology to the viscount. Mother is furious, I hope you realize. She was very much counting on cultivating some lofty connections through your new fiancée. Gossip is circulating as well. Don’t bring Emilia back here again.”

“Right. Understood.”

“And I don’t want to see mother out in the front offices anymore either. She can be in the back or in the house. If you need something, then you go to her.”

“Why? What’s wrong with her being there?”

“It’s called a precaution. I’ll write to Lord Tallini and explain that our mother made a silly mistake in her old age, and I’ll send something by way of apology. That ought to more or less smooth things over.”

“Surely there’s no need to go that—”

Tobias was met with another glare from his brother’s deep, inky-black eyes.

“You don’t take the nobility lightly, Tobias. There’s no telling what sort of connections they might have, and we don’t have the means to properly investigate either.”

“But it was just one letter. Surely it’s nothing to be so worried about.”

“If they decide there’s even the most infinitesimal chance that we’ll cause their family trouble, we’re finished.”

“But I mean...”

“Tobias, do you know how many employees we have at this company now?”

“Er, about seventy?”

“Within the kingdom, one hundred twenty-one; outside it, thirty-seven. Beyond them, we have over two hundred contracted mages, magical toolmakers, artisans, advertisers, and cleaning staff. Include their families and that’s over one thousand people. Our family alone is not Orlando & Co. As chairman, I have a duty to protect this company,” Ireneo said firmly, his expression the very image of their late father.

Tobias was lost for words.

“Do you know *why* father and Carlo were so keen for you to marry Dahlia?”

“Carlo told me that he wanted us to work together and support each other as fellow magical toolmakers. All father said was...to look after her.”

Upon hearing that, his elder brother heaved his deepest and longest sigh

since they'd sat down and clasped his hands upon the table. Those deep black eyes, just like their father's, slightly narrowed as he looked seriously at Tobias.

"You're not a child anymore, so it's time you heard the truth. Though I'm afraid you may not like it. The fact is, our father practically begged Carlo to let you marry Dahlia."

"Father did? But why would he do that?"

"We're commoners—magical toolmaking is not in our blood, and aside from you, there's not a single toolmaker in the family. Should you ever encounter problems with your work, there is no one in the family who can help you. Father wished to put Dahlia by your side so that you would always have someone to go to for help and advice."

"But...then what was in it for Carlo?"

Tobias's vision seemed to waver. Pain and an unpleasant tightness began to creep into his temples.

"It was self-interest for him as well. He knew that if he died, Dahlia would be left all on her own—a young woman with no other family to speak of. Her talent as a magical toolmaker could easily begin to draw *unwelcome* attention. If she were working with you, on the other hand, her creations would be treated as coming from you both, as a couple—and therefore would not be conspicuous. Once you were married, you would both be under the protection of Orlando & Co. That was the plan, at any rate. I only wish father had explained all this to mother."

"No one told me anything about this!"

Tobias barely recognized the anguished cry as his own voice. In his ears, his blood rushed thunderously like the waves of an angry sea. His chest felt tight, his breath short.

"You mean I was going to be nothing but a distraction, just a smokescreen for Dahlia's work?!"

"In a sense, yes. But Carlo appreciated you; he always praised your diligence. He respected the hard work you put in to become a magical toolmaker despite coming from a merchant family. He said, in fact, that you might surpass him one

day if you put in the effort. It wasn't about which one of you had more talent; what he wanted was for you to live together happily as partners in your craft."

"Why...Why did they never tell me? Father, Carlo, they...they never said a word!"

The older man's inky gaze faltered for a moment as though he was unsure of what to say next.

"If they had, you would never have agreed to marry her, would you?"

Those words were irrefutable. Tobias couldn't even begin to summon an argument. If he had known all this beforehand, he would have refused the engagement point-blank. He'd have told them he didn't *need* anyone's help. He had more ambition in life than being a mere distraction to keep Dahlia out of trouble.

He remembered something then—something Carlo had taught him with that gentle smile of his. A good magical toolmaker wasn't defined by how many inventions they had registered, he'd said. What mattered was putting your heart into crafting each and every tool, right down to the cheapest and most ordinary, so that every customer would receive the very best quality you could produce. Dahlia was Dahlia, Tobias was Tobias, and each of them had their own particular strengths. Dahlia was inventive and adaptable, and she excelled in creating new prototypes. Tobias, meanwhile, worked with care, patience, and thoroughness, ensuring every product was absolutely safe for the customers. *Both* of their talents were admirable and ought to be treasured. They should use their skills to complement each other and help each other grow.

Somewhere along the way, Tobias had forgotten Carlo's praise and begun constantly comparing himself to his junior apprentice, Dahlia. He became blind to everything but his own faults. His thoughts went around and around in circles as he desperately tried to come up with new inventions of his own. He lost all focus on the work in front of him, and even the simple pleasure of crafting withered into drudgery. In time, his anxiety gave way to jealousy and selfishness, and he found himself repeatedly pushing the boundaries of Dahlia's patience. In the end, he abandoned the woman who wouldn't love him for one who did: Emilia. Only now could he finally see his mistakes, piled on mistakes,

piled on mistakes—and all too late. There was nothing he could do now but bear the truth and try to contain the stricken cry that threatened to rip from his throat.

“I opposed father. You and Dahlia are magical toolmakers, not merchants like father and me. It wasn’t for us to orchestrate your marriage like a convenient business deal. But father kept hounding Carlo, and I suppose Carlo didn’t want to disappoint him because he gave in eventually. I accept my fault in this; I should have done more to stop it. We’ll shoulder the responsibility for what’s happened together.”

Only as Ireneo handed him a white handkerchief did Tobias finally become aware of the tears streaming down his cheeks. He pressed the handkerchief to his face and tried to calm his hitching breaths, but the sobs wouldn’t stop.

“I’ll see to it that no one comes in here for a while. You can leave when you’re ready. Once you’ve had some time to think, we’ll meet again and talk about where we go from here,” said Ireneo as he stood up and walked past Tobias on his way out of the door.

That voice could almost have belonged to their father.

Magical Toolmaker Dahlia

Volf left the Green Tower, returning to the castle in the early hours of the morning. He stopped at the gates to have his glasses inspected and registered. It was a fairly quick process. According to the inspector, efforts to develop glasses with concealment magic like these had been underway for a little while now, with some good results. Thankfully, this meant that Volf was not quizzed on where he'd acquired his pair. The inspector did, however, discover something unusual about Volf's glasses. As it turned out, their enchantment only worked on Volf. When the inspector tried them on, their only effect on his appearance was a slight difference in eye color from the tinted glass. He could only put it down to Volf having such extraordinary eyes to begin with.

"I'll bet they only work on pretty boys," one of the soldiers commented, at which everyone had a hearty laugh.

With that resolved, Volf went straight to his room in the barracks to rest, but he found himself awake again after only a couple of hours. After a quick wash in the bathhouse, Volf got dressed, put on the enchanted glasses, and headed back into town. Volf made for the Central District, where the streets were always busy. It was just around the time the morning market opened for business. Vegetables and grains were piled high in the storefronts, along with gleaming heaps of fresh meat and fish upon slabs of ice, and bundles of flowers in every color. At every turn, a potent *mélange* of fragrant spices assaulted his nostrils. Even at this early hour, shoppers jostled cheek by jowl along the lively street. There were countless voices hawking, haggling, greeting, and chattering; they flooded Volf's ears in a great wave of noise.

The young knight pushed up on the bridge of his glasses once before striding into the throng. As he moved through the crowd, Volf passed by all kinds of people, yet not a single pair of eyes lingered upon him. Even when someone did occasionally glance his way, perhaps because of his height or his unusual colored glasses, their interest was soon drawn elsewhere. There were no lustful gazes, no intense stares, no rude gawking. There was just the street. Just the

crowd. To at last be able to mingle with the townsfolk without drawing attention was an exhilarating feeling. Through anyone else's eyes, the scene would have seemed utterly ordinary, but Volf's "ordinary" had always been different from other people's.

Feeling for the first time as though he were a part of this city, Volf walked on, eventually arriving at the park he and Dahlia had visited yesterday. Here and there along the street, a few vendors were busily readying their stalls for the day ahead, but Volf saw no one else within the park. He wandered along slowly, taking in the lush greenery and the fragrance of the flowers, as he made his way to the same picnic bench where he'd enjoyed lunch with Dahlia. Volf leaned back and raised his eyes to the sky. It was a great expanse of blue today, unbroken by a single wisp of cloud. The tinted lenses added another shade of intensity to that dazzling blue. It stung Volf's eyes until they watered, a single tear rolling down his cheek.



Since he was a small child, Volf had been capable in just about all things except magic. As the fourth son of Earl Scalfarotto, he achieved what was expected of him in his studies, swordsmanship, and etiquette without any particular difficulties. Born to the earl's third wife, a woman without noble rank, he was always conscious never to draw attention away from his elder brothers. The earl saw to it that Volf's mother was provided for in every way, but now and then, the young Volf would catch her staring wistfully out the window. Before marrying, his mother had been a guard to a duchess. Seemingly, his father had been very insistent in his desire to wed her, and it had been her family, rather than she herself, who had approved the match. What power and wealth she would be marrying into, everyone had told her. She would rather have stayed a knight.

Volf's mother was supremely gifted in water magic. She was known to fight with a blade of solid ice that she could summon at will. She was also a very beautiful woman, with lustrous black hair and skin as pale and unblemished as newly fallen snow. His father had no doubt expected her to give birth to a child with even greater magical prowess and particular talent in water magic. Failing that, he would have been satisfied with a beautiful girl who would be eminently

marriageable once she came of age, even if her magical power was less than impressive. Instead, he got Volf, a child without a single iota of magical talent in any of the five schools prized by the aristocracy. Volf's striking beauty only added insult to injury. If only he'd been a girl, those looks might have secured his future, but they were useless, wasted on a son. His father had never taken much interest in him, and Volf had no particular memories of any meaningful conversations with the man.

"Your strengthening spells will serve you well as a knight, Volfred. That is what you will become," his mother had told him.

And so, Volf's training in swordsmanship began. His mother was a harsh teacher, not sparing him despite his tender age. Yet, no matter how skillfully he swung his sword, he knew he would never compare with his older brothers, who aspired to be great mages. He learned to empty his mind and absorb himself completely in his training. Perhaps in an effort to encourage him, his mother often read him tales of valiant knights. The young Volf was captivated by the magical swords that appeared in those stories. He could not use magic, but a magical blade was within his grasp. If only he could wield one of those, one day he might become even mightier than his mystic knight mother, stronger than *anyone*—an indomitable hero. That was the dream Volf cherished—a dream that all too soon would be shattered.

When Volf was in elementary school, he and his mother left on a trip across the earl's domain, along with the earl's first wife and her son, Volf's eldest brother. The entourage included several carriages and ample guards. They should have been safe. However, not far from the royal capital, the party came under attack from a large gang of bandits. Volf's mother hid him beneath the seats of the carriage and leaped outside. Men's screams rent the air, blasts of fire magic roared, blades clashed—then, quite suddenly, the sounds died away. When Volf dared to peek out of the carriage window, he saw his mother in front of the first wife's carriage with a blade through her shoulder.

In the wall of Volf's carriage was a longsword for self-defense. Gritting his chattering teeth, the young boy reached out, seized the hilt in his trembling hands, and jumped down from the carriage. By the time he reached his mother, there was nothing left of her but a body hacked in two upon the ground. He had

no memory of the sound that tore from his throat; he didn't know whether it was a scream, a howl of rage, or a wail of grief. From that point on, his memory began to fragment. With blade in hand, he'd whirled among the men as if possessed; his vision was drenched in crimson, then plunged into impenetrable darkness.

When Volf came to, he was lying on a treatment bed in the temple. He remembered finding his arms and right leg oddly clean and unmarked. His father, sitting at his bedside, told him of his mother's death and that the first wife and his older brother were safe.

"You fought well," he said, and hugged Volf so tightly he could barely breathe.

That was the first and only time in his life his father embraced him.

If he'd gotten out of the carriage sooner, if he'd only been stronger, would his mother still have died? Even without any magic power of his own, if he'd wielded a magical sword that day, would he have been able to save her?

Volf spent several days at the temple, doing little more than weeping in the arms of the maid attending him. When he finally returned, it was to a changed house. The father of the earl's second wife had passed away from illness, and her son, the second eldest, had fallen from his horse during a long ride and died from his injuries. To grieve her father and son, the second wife had gone away and entered a convent. Even at that age, Volf understood well what that meant. *People* were to be feared more than any sword, and his father more than most. That fact alone was seared into the boy's mind.

As he grew into a young man, unsettled and lost in life, Volf became aware of a change in the women—and some of the men—around him. He had soon grown sick of the lustful gazes, persistent stares, and unabashed propositions he was assailed with. Jealous men began to insult and belittle him, any friendships he made were soon in tatters, and he was frequently entangled in misunderstandings. Eventually, he lost the will to seek out new friends or bother righting people's misconceptions. His only refuge was in training with his sword, and he dedicated himself to it wholeheartedly.

When Volf joined the royal knights, he was told that his noble birth would mean nothing within their ranks. He applied to join the Order of Beast Hunters

as a Scarlet Armor. The role was ideal for him, he felt. The danger never fazed him, for he knew there was no one in the world who would mourn his loss. From time to time, he joined his comrades to enjoy good drinks and good food, but he continued to devote most of his spare hours to training. He thought life would go on this way until he was either slain in battle by a monster or retired from the knights' ranks. Yet Volf still harbored a dream that pursued him like a curse or an unfaltering prayer. Even now, he yearned for a magical sword. With such a sword in his hand, perhaps he could even best his mother, the mystic knight. Perhaps, the next time the nightmare of that day haunted his sleep, he could finally save her. But Volf knew in his heart that that dream would never come true.



Volf removed his glasses briefly before sliding them back on again. Every time he looked at them, he was reminded of a certain magical toolmaker. The day he'd finally stumbled out of the forest after falling from the sky with the wyvern, he'd been saved by a young man who called himself "Dali." The conversation they had was such a joy that Volf was left determined to see Dali again. His wish was soon granted, and the next time they met, they once again talked of magical swords and tools, enjoyed fine food, and raised many a glass to each other. Simply being in the company of that young woman—as she had turned out to be—was a genuine pleasure.

Dali—that is, Dahlia Rossetti—was a magical toolmaker. Volf had watched the sweat pour from her forehead like a waterfall as she'd enchanted the lenses in his glasses. As it had threatened to trickle into her eyes, she'd wiped it away with a sleeve, with no regard for gentility. Even as her makeup ran, her gaze never wavered from her work. Volf had been utterly captivated by the sight of her. Never in his life had he seen a woman look so earnest and so beautiful.

At the end of it, she had handed him these glasses. The lenses, enchanted with the magic of fairy glass, had shown Volf the world through the eyes of an ordinary man. They had allowed him, for the first time in his life, to blend into the streets of the royal capital. Though they had met only three times, Dahlia had changed his world. However, Volf desired nothing more from her than friendship. He wished only to remain by her side; to laugh and talk with her. He

wanted to support her in all her toolmaking endeavors. Anything she desired, he wanted to give her. He was resolved to protect her from anything or *anyone* that would do her harm.

But this wasn't love. He had no wish to become Dahlia's lover. Entering into that kind of relationship would surely mean they would part one day. It could even lead to him hurting her. Dahlia felt the same way; she didn't care to be seduced by him. That miraculous magical toolmaker, who had never once looked at him with eyes of lust, had sought nothing more than to protect him as a friend. It was as a friend that he wished to be there beside her, harboring no burdensome, complicated feelings, only friendship and respect.

Volf once again looked up at the sky. Through the tinted lenses, it was indescribably blue. Very soon, the dazzling sun would rise over the horizon. As he gazed skyward, the young man was unaware of what sparkled beneath his glasses. Shining in his golden eyes was the tender look of love.



It was just after midday, and Dahlia was in her workshop, checking over the sheets of waterproof cloth she'd prepared for the Couriers' Guild when she heard the bell at her gates. Guessing it must be Irma, she emerged from the tower to see Volf, who'd only left in the early hours this morning. She noticed immediately that he was wearing his enchanted glasses.

"Sorry to drop in on you like this. I wanted to pay for these glasses as soon as I could."

Volf's words tumbled out uncharacteristically quickly. He handed Dahlia a pouch of gold coins and a leather folder. She wished he wouldn't look so much like a dog who'd just fetched her a ball. She cocked her head in puzzlement—was he simply that grateful for the glasses?

"I thought it over and decided to get a scrivener to draw this up for me," Volf explained with a smile. "The last thing I want to do is cause any trouble for a dear friend."

"Don't tell me you..."

With a feeling of utter dread, Dahlia slowly opened the document to see the

words: “Dahlia Rossetti will be recognized as a friend of equal status and permitted to speak freely without fear of censure.” This declaration was followed by paragraphs and paragraphs of explication that took up not one but *two* sheets of parchment. Dahlia balked at the prospect of reading it all. *Now you’ve done it.* It wasn’t the most eloquent response, but it was all that came to mind. As she glanced down at the scrivener’s signature, she was perplexed to recognize that of Dominic’s from the Merchants’ Guild. How was she supposed to look him in the eye the next time she saw him? How would she explain? Dahlia longed to go crawl underneath her bed and hide.

“I...can’t believe you actually did it. Whyever did you go to the Merchants’ Guild?”

“I knew a scrivener who’s used to dealing with nobles would read far too much into it and make things complicated. So, I went to the Merchants’ Guild and explained to them, ‘I want to consult this magical toolmaker about some orders and need her to be able to speak freely with me.’ This man, Dominic, agreed to arrange it for me.”

“Oh. I see.”

It was a plausible enough explanation. She could only pray that Dominic had bought it.

“By the way, Dominic recommended I make an investment in the Rossetti Trading Company. What do you think? I’d do it by the book, of course, through the Merchants’ Guild.”

“What?”

What would Dominic say a thing like that for? Dahlia was baffled. She already had sufficient investors and wasn’t looking to increase the company’s capital any further at the moment. She’d only set it up to help with procuring materials.

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to bribe you into developing that new waterproof cloth or enchanted swords. If there’s a chance you’ll come up with more incredible inventions like these glasses, then I’m more than happy to support you. I have some savings I don’t really need anyway. Plus, I heard you’ll have a better chance of getting your hands on rare materials if you have more nobles

among your investors.”

His reasoning was sound, Dahlia had to admit. From Dominic’s perspective, both she and Volf must have seemed little more than children. No doubt he was simply trying to look after her. If Volf invested, the Scalfarotto name could open up many new procurement possibilities to her. When she thought of it that way, it seemed foolish to refuse. After all, when it came to appreciating magical materials, she and Volf were birds of a feather. Well, they were perched in the same tree, at any rate.

“Understood. Then I’ll accept your investment with gratitude. I promise to do the best work I can so you see a good return.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for springing it on you. I’ll arrange the payment with the guild as soon as I can. Also, I want you to let me know if you ever run into trouble, whether it’s to do with me or not. My home address and the barracks’ address are both included in that document. I’m a royal knight and a member of the Scalfarotto family, after all; may as well make good use of the name.”

“But Volf, you’re going to become a commoner someday. Isn’t that a bit of an abuse of power?”

“Not at all. As long as I still live in my father’s house, I’ll just be, ah...exercising my privilege.”

This man had a lovely face but a capricious character. In contrast to the care and kindness he showed Dahlia, there was his mischievous side that loved nothing more than to tease and poke fun at people. At times he was like a gentle dog, at others as carefree as any commoner, and now and then, she saw that darkness in his eyes that she’d come to associate with the nobility. He was utterly unreadable. For the sake of her sanity, she knew she had best give up on trying to read him and just accept this strange bundle of contradictions called Volf.

“Dahlia, I’m truly grateful. Thank you. For everything,” Volf said as he suddenly bent over in a deep bow.

It felt like this young noble had been bowing to her, a mere commoner, nonstop since yesterday. Just as she opened her mouth to implore him to stand up straight, he did just that, looking down at her with a sunny, boyish smile.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am. Just by putting these on, I can walk around wherever I want. No one calls out to me; no one stares at me. I don’t get any men sneering at me or women asking my name. I walked here all the way from the castle today and wasn’t stopped once.”

“I’m so glad.”

She was already familiar with Volf’s struggles, but hearing him speak like that tugged at her heartstrings. She hoped he would use those glasses to explore the city to his heart’s content.

“I hate to ask, but I think I would like a second pair after all, in case these break,” Volf said apologetically. “I don’t expect you to make them right away, of course. I saw how hard it was on you. But I would like to put in the order. I don’t mind how much it costs.”

“No problem. I’ll find out where I can procure some more fairy glass and let you know as soon as I’ve calculated the costs. What color would you like? I used a faint blue-gray for that pair, but we can do something different this time if you’d prefer.”

The blue-gray lenses and fairy glass had turned Volf’s golden eyes green. Perhaps for his next pair of glasses, she could choose a different color of glass and imbue the fairy glass with a different image. The big question, however, was whose eyes she should model them after this time.

“I’ll stick with the same color. This green’s quite similar to yours, I noticed.”

“I think we should pick a different color! A *totally* different one!”

“Wait, no! I like this one!”

Purely out of embarrassment, Dahlia tried to make him change his mind, but Volf was having none of it. He sounded so much like a little child desperate to have his way, she couldn’t help laughing.

“I was only joking, don’t worry. There are lots of people with green eyes, after all.”

“Right, got it.”

“Shall I put the kettle on?”

“Oh, no thanks. I can see you’re working; I don’t want to get in your way. I’ll come by some other time. As soon as I know when I’ll have time off, I’ll send a messenger to let you know. I’d love for us to meet then, if you don’t have other plans.”

“Sounds good. What do you say we have a go at enchanting a shortsword next time?”

“Well, now I *really* can’t wait.”

It was funny; both of them now took it for granted that they would meet again and eagerly anticipated it. They’d met a mere three times before today, yet Dahlia felt as though she’d known Volf for years.

“All right, then. See you soon!” Volf said with a grin.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Volf removed his glasses for a moment and gazed squarely at Dahlia with his deep golden eyes. It was the kind of gaze usually reserved for someone very dear, and for a moment, Dahlia almost believed she was. The power of this man’s beauty couldn’t be taken lightly.

“Thank you once again. From now on, I can walk through town to get here on my own, all thanks to these.”

Volf slowly slid the glasses back on and smiled before returning back the way he’d come. Dahlia watched him go, noting the spring in his step. Once he was out of sight, she returned to her workshop. Today, she’d finish working on that consignment of waterproof cloth, and in the evening, she’d open a bottle of red wine and sip away while she refined plans she’d drawn up for some new magical tools.

After all, she *was* a magical toolmaker. Almost since the day she was born, she’d been at her craftsman father’s side, watching him work. All these years, she’d aspired to follow in his footsteps. Carlo Rossetti’s magical tools changed so many lives and brought smiles to households across the land. She’d always been so proud of him and respected him deeply. She wanted to uphold his legacy by continuing to craft the magical tools he’d invented. She had always hoped to one day become as fine a toolmaker as her father had been. At the

same time, she had her own identity and pride as a craftswoman. She was driven to bring her own unique creations into the world—tools that would make people’s lives easier and make them smile. She wanted to be known not as Carlo’s daughter but as *Dahlia*, a magical toolmaker whose works brought joy into people’s lives. If she’d ever said all this to her father, she knew just how he’d have reacted. “Go on, then,” he’d have said with a smile. “You can do it!”

Society didn’t have much regard for the magical toolmaking craft. She’d been told that the likes of her were nothing compared to mages and alchemists. She couldn’t slay monsters with impressive blasts of fire or ice. She couldn’t heal people’s wounds. She couldn’t brew potions or conjure up precious metals like an alchemist. Even when she made something she was proud of, people would often question what the point of it was. Sometimes people wouldn’t read the instructions properly and dismissed her tools as useless or too much hassle. She’d been called tight-fisted over the prices of her magical tools and the arrangements in her contracts. Developing new tools felt like fumbling in the dark at times; her experiments were far more likely to fail than succeed. Sometimes, when looking at a pile of useless prototypes, she almost lost the will to go on. However carefully she performed her enchantments, she was constantly at risk of wasting her expensive materials, and she often did.

In spite of all this, there were many times in Dahlia’s life when she felt immensely glad to be a magical toolmaker. She was so happy each time someone smiled at her and told her how useful one of her tools had been to them. There was no better feeling than knowing a tool she’d created had made someone happier, even if only a little bit. On days like those, she was reminded why she could never give up this craft. Today was one of those days.





Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—the Dryer

My little girl's the cutest in the whole wide world.

Carlo's six-year-old daughter, Dahlia, was a gorgeous little angel with vivid red hair and the gentlest green eyes. Her face was a little mature for her age, but her expressions were so animated that one could never tire of looking at her. She may have been a tiny bit clumsy, but she made up for it with her proficiency in reading and writing.

Dahlia had been one and a half when she'd spoken her first word: "fada" (father). Her second word was "misofee" (Miss Sofia). Sofia was the elderly maid who helped Carlo with housework and caring for his young daughter. The first time Dahlia had called out to him, he'd grinned from ear to ear as he replied, but he had been so overcome with happiness that he'd sunk to his knees and been unable to move for several minutes.

It soon became clear that Dahlia had inherited her father's passion for toolmaking. She pointed out the "madic toows" (magical tools) in the workshop. The first thing she ever asked for was a "madic kistal" (magic crystal). Nearly all of her earliest words had something to do with magical toolmaking. When she was four years old, she would cling to Carlo's side without getting in the way and watch him as he worked. Every time he enchanted something, she would stare in astonishment with little murmurs of "wow," and "'majing" (amazing). Carlo worked twice, no, *three* times as hard whenever Dahlia was by his side.

Soon, she wanted more to do besides merely watching, so Carlo set aside a corner of the workshop especially for her. He prepared some spent magic crystals and harmless materials for her to play with, along with some simple books on magical tools and colorfully illustrated bestiaries. Dahlia was delighted, amusing herself for hours on end in her special corner. Of course, she did all the things an ordinary child did too, happy to run around and play with

the neighborhood kids whenever they invited her. She seemed to be best friends with a girl named Irma. Irma lived nearby and was three years older than Dahlia. They could often be found playing together with building blocks and marbles.

On her fifth birthday, Dahlia announced, “When I grow up, I’m going to be a magical toolmaker like father!”

Carlo was overjoyed, and he immediately threw his full support behind her. His fellow toolmakers were aghast that he’d begun teaching the craft to his five-year-old daughter.

“Have you gone loopy? She’s *five*!”

“You spoil that child rotten!”

In fact, Carlo found that Dahlia absorbed the basics of toolmaking like a sponge. Of course, he held off on things like input and output calculations and fortifying techniques. Those would probably need to wait until she’d graduated from elementary school. Children entered elementary school at age eight; until then, he planned to teach her reading, writing, and simple mathematics, taking his time readying her for school.

However, his little daughter exceeded all his expectations. Her magical toolmaking books were soon stuffed with bookmarks. Before long, she came to him pleading to see even bigger books. He gave her all the volumes on magical toolmaking he had, along with more bestiaries and catalogs of crafting materials. He also permitted her to handle some magic crystals with a little power left in them, taking the opportunity to begin teaching her how to control magic. He made absolutely sure she understood how to use any tools she needed safely and that she would only do so when he was in the workshop beside her. Seeing how delighted she was, Carlo soon let his guard down.

“Eeek!”

One day, when Carlo was out in the garden, he heard a scream that made his blood run cold.

“Dahlia!”

Carlo burst into the workshop to find white smoke rising and a sizable scorch

mark running up at least a third of the wall near the entrance. Thankfully, the only things actually on fire were a few pieces of paper, which Carlo quickly extinguished with a water crystal.

“Dahlia, these crystals aren’t toys! What if you’d gotten burned? What were you *thinking*?!” Carlo roared at her. A few locks of her red hair had been singed. “I told you *never* to use magic crystals unless I was with you!”

Dahlia listened meekly as her father launched into a harsh and thorough lecture on the danger of magic crystals. Eventually, though, it became too much for the little girl. Carlo’s eyes widened as he saw tears spill from Dahlia’s emerald-green eyes.

“I’m...s-sorry...”

“I know, I know. Look, why did you do this?”

“I wanted to...m-make something in secret.”

“What for?”

“I-It was a surprise. I thought...you’d be happy...”

As his daughter tried her best to explain herself through sniffles and sobs, he noticed an L-shaped metal tube on the floor at her feet.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a dryer... It was...supposed to blow warm air.”

Carlo saw what appeared to be a blueprint for a magical tool made with air and fire crystals, both kinds of magic coming out through an L-shaped tube. There wasn’t much wrong with the construction, but without any adjustment, the crystals would have expressed almost their full power.

“I didn’t think...it would come out so hard.”

“Yeah, I haven’t taught you the proper calculations or how to reduce crystals’ power yet.”

“I’m really sorry...” Dahlia apologized again, doing her best to hold back her tears.

It pained Carlo to see her eyes so reddened.

“What did you want to do with this ‘dryer,’ Dahlia?”

“I wanted to dry my hair with it... Long hair’s hard to dry properly.”

Dahlia may still have been small, but she was a woman nonetheless. She was reaching the age when she’d begun to care more about her hairstyle. Carlo felt ashamed that he hadn’t even considered this before now.

“I understand. Let’s see if we can make it better, eh?”

She’s only six; shouldn’t be that much of a challenge, Carlo thought, but he soon found himself completely absorbed in the project.

“Whoa!”

Carlo staggered backward as he tried out the “dryer” in the garden. A light press of the switch was enough to blast out a long, fierce tongue of flame. This kind of power would be an intermediate spell for a mage. The lawn in front of Carlo was scorched black in an instant.

“It turned into a flamethrower,” muttered Dahlia as she watched from behind, looking gloomy.

She often came up with names like that on the spot—“dryer,” “flamethrower,” and so on. It was as if she somehow already knew what these things were. Carlo was sure she had a clear idea in her head of the object she’d wanted to create.

“N-No, no, you’ve got the right idea!” he quickly reassured her.

Her tearstained face lit up with a smile.

“I’ll just add some magic circuits to reduce the power,” he continued, “and we should have it blowing nice, warm air in no time.”

“Can you make it blow cold air *and* warm air?”

“Sure, no problem. You just adjust the fire crystal’s circuits like this.”

“That’s amazing, father! I want to make the air blow hard and gentle too. Can you do that?”

“Course I can!”

Carlo incorporated all of these functions, just as Dahlia wanted. During

testing, he noticed that the metal pipe was showing signs of degrading, likely due to being exposed to high temperatures. He decided to remake the object in a different metal. Dahlia was very particular about the shape. They spent a long time perfecting it until, at last, this “dryer,” like a curiously shaped fan heater, was complete.

Before they knew it, dawn was breaking. Carlo and Dahlia went to the bathroom and wet their hair—it was the moment of truth. As it turned out, the dryer performed perfectly. Father and daughter toasted their success—Carlo with red wine, Dahlia with grape juice. Their forgotten dinner became breakfast instead, and they ate with relish. Just as they finished, the maid Sofia arrived at the tower, back from her day off.

“Welcome back, Miss Sofia! We made a dryer!” Dahlia exclaimed with a grin as she hugged the maid, only to slump to the floor in a heap a moment later.

“Miss Dahlia?!”

Carlo smiled wryly as he scooped his daughter into his arms. She was fast asleep, just like a magic crystal that had exhausted its power.

“Ah, we were up all night, you see. No wonder she’s sleepy.”

“All night?” The maid stiffened, turning a frigid stare upon Carlo. “You kept this little girl up *all night*? Sir, what exactly is the meaning of this?!”

“Well, we were crafting a new magical tool together...”

“That is no excuse whatsoever. Miss Dahlia is a *child*; she ought to be in bed no later than eight o’clock. Goodness knows I’ve reminded you often enough. Please tell me you at least gave her a bath yesterday.”

“Sorry, not yet.”

As she slipped into dreamland, Dahlia could faintly hear Sofia giving her father a thorough tongue-lashing. It reminded her of being scolded by her mother in her previous life. As she lay huddled in her father’s arms, her brows drew together in a slightly troubled expression. Carlo noticed immediately.

“Let me put Dahlia to bed first, would you? Then we’ll talk about this properly.”

“Yes, certainly. Once you’ve done that, we shall indeed talk. *At length.*”

The old woman’s smile sent a shiver up his spine. She saw to it that he would never make the same mistake twice.

From then on, Dahlia made steady—in fact, *rapid*—progress in her magical toolmaking. She was always talking cheerfully of ideas that, in all honesty, seemed impossible to achieve with the magical tools Carlo knew.

“I bet you could make it for me one day, father!” she’d say, beaming up at him. “When I’m older, let’s make it together!”

No matter what she dreamed up, she always had total faith that he’d find a way to create it. Who was he to tell her it couldn’t be done? How could he say that it was too difficult or that he didn’t know how? It only drove Carlo to work, experiment, and study his craft harder than ever before.

“Daughters are bound to marry and fly from the nest one day,” the scrivener, Dominic, said to him more than once. “Why don’t you consider remarrying?”

Carlo knew it made sense, but he simply had no desire to get married again. In fact, he found it difficult to imagine Dahlia marrying either. If she really *had* to, perhaps they could at least make it to someone in the neighborhood so she’d always be close by. *You never know, one day she might leave him and come back home with her kids in tow, and... Wait, no, that’s not how it’s s’posed to go.* Carlo found himself picturing his grandchildren—their angelic faces, their bright-red hair.

“Such pretty hair you have, Miss Dahlia,” Sofia had once said to his daughter, some years ago now. “It’s the color of crimson clover.”

Dahlia had pouted.

“I want sandy-color hair like Fadder.”

“But yours is lovely. And you have your father’s green eyes.”

“We should match.”

Listening to his slightly sulky little daughter, Carlo felt a pang in his chest. Dahlia had never once asked him about her mother. She seemed to feel no yearning or attachment to her, to an extent that seemed strange for a small

child. Carlo had always put it down to Sofia's devoted care.

However, one day, one of the neighbors asked Dahlia, "Don't you get lonely without a mother?"

"Nope! I've got Fadder!" she answered without a moment's hesitation.

Even now, Carlo could vividly remember his daughter's dazzling smile. If there was one thing he knew, it was that he would never forget it until the day he died. Dahlia's mother had had the same crimson clover hair. Her almond-shaped eyes, too, had been a rich shade of red. She'd been a stunningly beautiful woman, with feline elegance in everything she did. Though he would never see her here in his tower again, Carlo loved her still. That said, were you to ask him if she were the person he loved most in the world, the reply would be a simple "no." There was now no one Carlo adored more than his daughter, Dahlia.

My Dahlia's the dearest little girl in the whole wide world.





Vice-Guildmaster of the
Merchants' Guild
Gabiella

Veteran Scrivener
Dominic

Reincarnated Female
Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia

Dependable
Couriers' Guild Worker
Marcello

Hairdresser and
Dahlia's Childhood Friend
Irma

Handsome Knight from
the Order of Beast Hunters
Volfred

Dryers were invented by Dahlia's father when she was a child. To be more accurate, they were a joint accomplishment between father and daughter.

"THERE, THAT SUITS YOU SO MUCH BETTER."

"THANKS, IRMA. IT'S SO LIGHT; IT FEELS GREAT."

The red-haired young woman in the mirror smiled. It had been two years since she'd seen her vivid natural color; it would take a little time to get used to it again.



Bonus Translator's Notes

Hello! I'm Niki, the translator for *Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools*. Thank you for reading all the way to the end! I very much hope you've enjoyed this first volume and that we'll be seeing you again in the next one.

This time, I'd like to talk about some of the animal metaphors I came across while translating this volume. There were quite a few, and they each required some careful thought. I think these phrases give a fascinating insight into how different animals are perceived across cultures.

You will no doubt have noticed that there is a strong drinking culture in the kingdom of Ordine. It has given rise to specific terms denoting people's tolerance to alcohol—namely “kingsnake” and “sea serpent.” Following the first mention of kingsnakes, Dahlia notes that in her previous world, this term corresponds to the word “uwabami.” The primary meaning of uwabami is “giant snake,” but it is also a slang term referring to a heavy drinker. Kingsnake is exactly the same, referring to both a giant desert-dwelling serpent and someone who can down more pints than your average barfly. However, these metaphors presented a challenge for me as the translator because we make no association between snakes and alcohol in English. Furthermore, there is no equivalent animal I could have used to convey the meaning. We have some *similes* linking animals and alcohol, such as “drinks like a fish” and “pissed as a newt,” but there is no single animal that serves as a byword for a heavy drinker.

For this reason, I removed Dahlia's mention of uwabami because it would be meaningless to Anglophone readers, and I substituted a simple explanation that conveyed the same information. I don't believe that leaving kingsnake and sea serpent as is makes for a perfect translation (not that such a thing exists). To Japanese readers, these metaphors will have felt familiar and obvious, but they don't perform the same function in English due to the absence of a cultural link between snakes and alcohol. In Japanese, this passage serves to bridge the gap between Dahlia's first and second worlds by demonstrating their similarities. In

English, the foreignness of the metaphors may actually have the opposite effect, making the story's setting feel even more alien.

One might well wonder *how* giant snakes came to be associated with alcohol in Japan in the first place. For those who know their mythology, there's actually a clue in the description of how hunters capture the monstrous kingsnakes. It bears a marked resemblance to the tale of how the hero Susanoo slew the evil eight-headed serpent, Yamata no Orochi. After intoxicating it with strong sake, Susanoo cut the beast into pieces. This legend, along with snakes' ability to swallow very large prey, is thought to be the reason they are associated with heavy drinking in Japan.

Let's explore the serpentine theme a little further. Twice, during his first outing with Dahlia, Volf uses the phrase "yabu kara hebi" (a snake from a bush). Looking at the literal translation, it may appear similar to the English metaphor "snake in the grass," but it has quite a different meaning. It comes from a longer phrase meaning to poke a bush and draw out a snake, and it refers to unnecessary trouble brought upon oneself. Some dictionaries offer "kicking a hornet's nest" as a suitable translation for this phrase, but this was much too strong in the context of Volf and Dahlia's conversation. The hornet's nest metaphor implies attracting some real wrath and suffering unpleasant consequences; all Volf is concerned about, however, is fending off Dahlia's attempts to save him money. This was a case that called for me to translate the spirit of the words rather than to try to reach for an equivalent metaphor that doesn't really exist. If we translate a little more literally, Volf's words when Dahlia offers to split the bill for lunch are as follows:

"It seems like a snake's come out from the bush. I'll put it back."

Arguably, the meaning of the metaphor is not too challenging to intuit, but it doesn't sound at all natural in English. I rendered it as:

"Looks like I said too much. Pretend you never heard that."

Later in the scene, when Dahlia asks him to forget about repaying her for a potion she gave him, Volf repeats the phrase. Once again, I chose a translation that fitted naturally into the flow of the conversation:

"I'm not forgetting about anything."

It's a little more to the point, covering only the "I'll put it back" part of the original phrase. The essential meaning, however, is intact. When faced with a phrase that doesn't translate easily, it's always helpful to take a step back and look at the forest, not the trees. You should ask yourself what the basic function of the line is supposed to be. In this case, Volf's use of *yabu kara hebi* is intended as a flat refusal of Dahlia's offer. Any translation that satisfactorily performs this function (while being appropriate to the character, of course) may be considered valid.

Now, let's put scales aside at last and turn our attention to feathers. Once again, this fascinating and initially mystifying metaphor comes to us courtesy of Volf. In his conversation with Dahlia about a certain duchess he has long been acquainted with, Volf mentions that, following her husband's death, she was inundated with "*tsubame shigansha*"—literally, "swallow applicants." As with *uwabami*, *tsubame* is a word with a double meaning. In most contexts, it refers to a swallow, but it also happens to be a byword for a young man in a romantic relationship with an older woman. As before, I found no convenient equivalent for this metaphor in English, and it would be impossible for Anglophone readers to intuit, so I chose to swap the metaphor for a simile. Flies, while not as elegant as swallows flitting across the summer sky, served well to express the irritation caused by the duchess's persistent suitors. It was also rather fun slipping in the right vocabulary to continue the theme through the dialogue—"buzzing," "swarms," "repelled," and "swatted."

Given the origins of the swallow metaphor, it's actually a rather curious one to hear from the mouth of a man from another world. It dates back to a single letter written to pioneering Japanese feminist Hiratsuka Raicho. The letter was penned by artist Okumura Hiroshi, who was Hiratsuka's lover despite being several years her junior. Hiratsuka's followers were scandalized by their relationship, and so Okumura wrote to her to end things. His letter included this rather poetic line:

"This young swallow shall fly away so that peace may return to the pond."

This was published in a magazine run by Hiratsuka, and the little bird has been saddled with a double meaning ever since. I couldn't help wondering whether *Dahlia's* author was aware of this metaphor's origin, and if they were, whether

it gave them pause when they wrote it into the story. When it comes to historical and fantasy stories, I believe writers and translators alike often find themselves mulling over words and phrases that might be anachronistic. Just the other day, I removed the phrase “like clockwork” from a translation because I couldn’t be sure such mechanisms had been invented in that story’s setting. That said, it’s impossible to go hunting down the etymology of every other word to be sure *everything* is perfectly appropriate to period and place. We’re writing in modern times, after all, for modern readers.

Having illustrated some of the challenges the animal metaphors in *Dahlia* gave me, I’ll conclude with one which was a breeze. Even when the phrase is translated literally, you could probably guess what Dahlia means when she says she and Volf are “onaji ana no mujina”—“badgers in the same hole.” It means that they are like-minded, *i.e.* birds of a feather. This was one of the rare and satisfying cases in which one metaphor could be neatly replaced with another.

I very much hope these notes have been interesting and have provided some insight into the translation process. The Japanese language is a source of endless fascination for me, and I’d recommend anyone who enjoys Japanese media to have a go at learning it.

See you next time!

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 1

by Hisaya Amagishi

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